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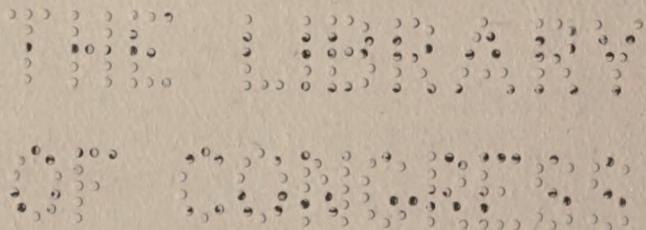
BY

W. E. NORRIS

"
AUTHOR OF

"The Countess Radna," "Mysterious Mrs. Wilkinson," etc.

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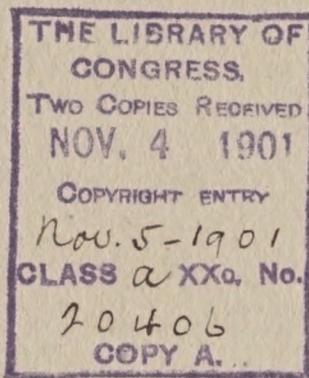


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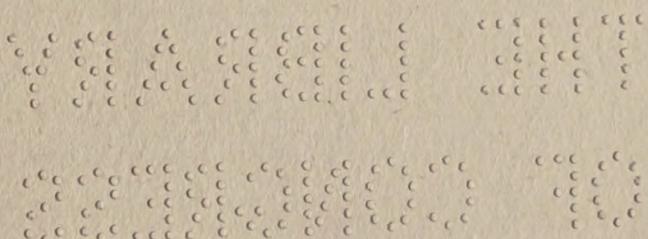
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HIS GRACE.

CHAPTER I.

THE SACKED SOLICITOR.

IN the month of May, 1887, at which time, as will be remembered, preparations were being made for the fit celebrating of the jubilee of our most gracious Sovereign Lady Queen Victoria, I, Philip Martyn, was in a frame of mind very far removed from being jubilant. I don't mean to say that I am, or was, one whit less loyal than other people—on the contrary, I am one of those quiet, law-abiding persons who are bound to be loyal to the form of government under which they live, and, notwithstanding my devotion to the House of Hanover, everything leads me to believe that, had a British Republic been proclaimed before the date of my birth, I should have been unreservedly loyal to that—but I suppose that with the generality of us our personal affairs and interests occupy a somewhat larger share of our attention than those of the nation at large, and the truth is that, on the particular afternoon to which I allude, I had clean forgotten the circumstance of her Majesty's having reigned over us with honor and distinction for half a century. My per-

sonal affairs and interests were just then in a parlous state ; neither honor nor distinction had I achieved ; nor, so far as I could foresee, was there the slightest prospect that, in my case, diligence and conscientious effort would ever be crowned by those rewards.

“ The long and the short of it, Philip,” my Uncle John said to me, as I helped him to struggle into his overcoat before he left the office, “ is that you are not fitted to take a leading part in a business like ours. Understand me, I am not blaming you ; I am merely stating a fact. There are men who are born to be lawyers, and there are other men who, I presume, were born to be something else ; though, if you’ll excuse my saying so, I’ll be hanged if I can lay my finger upon the especial purpose for which you were created. What I do know, and what it is better and kinder to tell you at once, is that you were not created to be a solicitor. I have had some experience of you by this time, and I think it only fair to warn you that you may stay here until your hair is gray without much hope of being taken into partnership. I am sorry for it ; but necessity has no law, and the law knows no necessities, except those imposed by Act of Parliament or by contracts duly signed and attested. Not being an idiot, I never contracted to make you a member of my firm ; although I am, of course, aware that that was what you and your mother looked forward to when I advised that you should pass your examinations and promised to find employment for you in the office. Personally, I should have been only too pleased to give you every encouragement : it is no fault of mine, and I daresay it is no fault of yours either, that I am unable to do so. You lack the requisite abilities,

that's all. I am not making any complaint, mind you ; only, if I were in your place, I should drop the law and try to discover my real mission in life. As I said before, I am not clever enough to assist you in your researches ; still, the odds are that you *have* a mission of one kind or another, because it seems scarcely reasonable to conclude that you can have been sent into an overcrowded world without any individual capacity for usefulness whatsoever."

It was not often that my uncle treated me to so prolonged a harangue ; nor, I am sure, would he have done so then, had he not been very much in earnest and rather angry into the bargain. He had some excuses for being angry with which it is needless to trouble the reader ; he was perfectly justified in intimating that I was not cut out to adorn a profession which I have always abhorred ; his advice that I should abandon it and seek some other field of enterprise would have been admirable, if I had possessed ever so small a private income upon which to subsist while awaiting better things. But, unhappily, I had nothing beyond what my mother was able to spare me out of her own straitened means ; and that was why I was a sorrowful man as I wended my way westwards after office hours.

When I sat down to write this narrative, I made up my mind that I would say as little as possible about myself ; because in the course of it I shall only appear as what I actually am—a practical nonentity, whose disappearance at any moment from these earthly scenes would cause no appreciable inconvenience to anybody. But the difficulty of speaking in the first person when one is neither a hero nor anything resembling one is somewhat greater than I thought it was going to be ;

and it seems almost necessary, for purposes of clearness, that I should start by being a little egotistical. I must just mention that my father had been a wealthy merchant who had failed in business late in life and had died shortly afterwards, leaving his widow and his two children with only a few hundreds a year wherewith to engage upon the struggle for existence ; I must add that I, who had been originally intended for the Guards, was compelled by force of circumstances to accept Uncle John's suggestions with gratitude ; and I suppose I had better also confess without more ado that I had a certain facility for the composition of poetry. Nobody, I am sure, will be so unkind as to grudge me the privilege of calling my compositions poetry, because nobody who reads these lines is in the very least likely to have ever perused my poems. They have been published ; but my publisher assures me—and I can well believe him—that they have at no time had a wide circulation. At that time, however, it did not seem to me an impossible thing that the public might eventually recognize some merit in my attempts at versification and even go so far as to pay me for the same ; so that, on my way from the City to St. James's Street I asked myself quite seriously whether it was not my probable mission in life to be a poet in a humble fashion. I have since discovered that my mission in life is essentially prosaic. One makes these discoveries in the course of a year or two, and they are doubtless salutary, if they are not precisely agreeable.

The first thing that I saw, after reaching my club and picking up one of the evening papers, was that the Duke of Hurstbourne was dead. The announcement interested me and served to divert my thoughts

for the moment from personal perplexities; because, although I had never seen the deceased nobleman, and although, as the newspaper obligingly informed its readers, he had not been in any sense a prominent personage, I remembered that my old schoolfellow Arthur Gascoigne had been his nephew and his heir-presumptive. The presumption had now been converted into a reality; the small boy who had been my fag not so very long before, who had basked in my smiles and trembled at my frown, was a full-blown duke, while I was but a budding solicitor, not to say a solicitor who had been frostily nipped in the bud. Such are the revenges of time, and such the inequalities of human existence! However, I was not so shabby as to grudge Gascoigne his promotion. We can't all of us be dukes, and he had always been such a good little fellow that I had no doubt as to his eventually proving quite as presentable a duke as the rest of his compeers. I had not seen much of him since old Eton days, our paths in life having naturally been so divergent; still, we had come across one another every now and again, and he had always seemed glad to see me and chat over bygone times. I was glad to think that all this honor and wealth had come to him, because I suspected from what I had heard that he had become a somewhat extravagant young gentleman, and I knew that he was not rich.

While I was holding the unread newspaper in my hand and meditating philosophically over the tremendous issues involved in a system of hereditary succession, I was accosted by another member of the club who was also a former schoolfellow of mine, and who said—

“So old Hurstbourne has been gathered to his fathers

at last, I see. Luck for little Gascoigne, isn't it? Though I suppose he'll get nothing except the title and the entailed estates; and what they're worth nobody seems to know."

"Why won't he get anything more?" I inquired.

"Oh, because his uncle wouldn't have anything to do with him—never saw him, in fact, I believe. There was a deadly feud between his father, Lord Charles, and the head of the family. What it was about I can't say; but they didn't speak, and when Lord Charles died, the Duke, who, as you know lived and died a bachelor, rather ostentatiously took up Paul Gascoigne, Arthur's cousin. I expect he has left the whole of the London property, which is worth any amount of money, to Paul. Still, Arthur ought to do middling well with the estates which are bound to be his, and most likely his mother will manage to pick up an heiress for him to marry. Ever meet Lady Charles?"

I had not had that advantage, and I said so.

"Queer old girl," resumed my well-informed friend, with an amused smile. "Not a bad old sort, in her way, though she isn't exactly the sort of mother whom I should covet personally. As she isn't one's mother, one only laughs, don't you know; but if she were one's mother, I daresay one might writhe occasionally. Arthur doesn't writhe. He's such a good-hearted little beggar that he couldn't for the life of him see a fault in anybody whom he was fond of; and, after all, he's quite right to be fond of her, for she adores him and thinks nothing good enough for him. She was an heiress herself once upon a time; but that old rip Lord Charles made ducks and drakes of her fortune, they say. Anyhow, she has been pretty hard up of

late years. It's rather a joke—only, of course, as you don't know her, you can't see the joke—that in a few months' time Lady Charles will be doing the honors at Hurstbourne Castle."

He had a good deal more to say about the late Duke of Hurstbourne, who, it appeared, had been an individual of eccentric and retiring disposition, as well as about the quarrels and peculiarities of the Gascoigne family in general ; but I did not listen very attentively to his prattle. I had family affairs of my own to think about which, if less interesting to him and the world at large than those of a duke, were far more so to me, and it did not seem likely that I should have any further personal relations with the newly-elevated member of the highest rank in the peerage. I remember that, while he was talking, I felt vaguely sorry that circumstances should have rendered me such a complete outcast from high society—not because I cared for high society, of which I had little knowledge or experience, but because I cared a good deal for Arthur Gascoigne. Nowadays I sometimes wonder what can have made me care for him at a time when, after all, I was but slightly acquainted with him. He himself declares that it must have been my immense superiority to him in the matter of physical size and strength ; for indeed I am a big, muscular man, whereas he is a diminutive and not very powerful one, though, heaven knows, he has the pluck of a whole regiment !

" My dear Martyn," says he—I don't mind repeating this, because there isn't a word of truth in it—" it is your nature to think of anybody and everybody in the world before you think of yourself ; and as nothing would induce you to admit that you have twice the

brains of other people, you are driven to place your biceps at their service. It stands to reason that a poor, unprotected pigmy must have irresistible claims upon you, and that, you may depend upon it, is what made you resolve to be my friend and champion."

All that is very great nonsense. I do not quote it in order to make the reader think me modest and unselfish, but only to convey some idea of the simplicity of Hurstbourne's character. It does not occur to him that he possesses any individual attraction—and in truth the attraction which he unquestionably does possess would be a little difficult to define—if anyone tries to be a friend to him, he at once assumes that that person must be abnormally noble and generous. Perhaps that is one reason why he continues to the present day to love and admire his mother, who—However, if I have to say anything disparaging about her, I will say it later on.

At the time of which I speak I naturally took it for granted that the Duke of Hurstbourne must henceforth move in a sphere as remote from my own as that of any duke must of necessity be; yet dukes and beggars do come across one another in the street, and it was in the street that I found myself face to face with my former fag a few days later. The street was muddy, too, after a recent shower, and he came running across it in his patent-leather boots to shake hands with me; which seems to show that some people may be dukes without realizing that it behooves them to beckon their friends through the mud when they wish to speak to them.

"Well, old chap," said he, "how has the world been treating you this last ever so long?"

"Not with the same liberality," I replied somewhat gloomily, "as it has treated you. I have not lost a wealthy and noble uncle, for the sufficient reason that I have no wealthy or noble uncle to lose. At least, I believe Uncle John is pretty well off ; but he is not dead or going to die ; and when he does die, nothing can be more certain than that he won't leave me a penny. At present he is anxious to make it clear to me that I shall not get many pence out of him even while he lives. All the same, I am glad to think that you are more fortunate."

"Oh, well," he answered, with a laugh, "I don't expect my old uncle meant me to be any more fortunate than he could help. I haven't an idea at this moment whether I am a rich man or a pauper ; but I shall hear all about it after the funeral to-morrow, I suppose. What's up between you and *your* old man? Not a row, I hope? It's awful cheek for me to offer you advice ; but really, my dear old Martyn, I wouldn't quarrel with him if I were you. When all's said and done, he has it in his power to make you or mar you—hasn't he now?"

That was Hurstbourne all over. People who think that they know him, but who are in reality far too stupid to be even remotely conscious of their own stupidity, are wont to describe him as an excitable, scatter-brained, pleasure-loving sort of fellow, and to assume as a matter of course that, because he likes amusing himself, his personal amusement must invariably occupy the foremost place in his thoughts. How many of them, I wonder, if they had just succeeded to a dukedom and were absolutely in the dark as to whether their strawberry-leaves had brought them immense

wealth or comparative poverty would deem the fortunes or misfortunes of a humble lawyer worthy of their attention? Yet I verily believe that Hurstbourne, after I had told him something of the troubles and perplexities to which I was a prey, was a good deal more anxious about my prospects than he was about his own.

“ Well, we must get you out of that beastly office somehow,” he said at length; “ there’s no good in sticking to work that you hate—especially after the old boy has given you such a broad hint to retire. I wonder whether I couldn’t get some sort of appointment for you—a county-court judgeship, don’t you know, or something. I’m afraid I’m not going to be a very big man; still, the title ought to carry a certain amount of influence with it. Anyhow, Lord Chancellors and people of that kind would be pretty sure to receive me civilly if I went and looked them up, eh? ”

I thought it quite likely that the Lord Chancellor would be civil to the Duke of Hurstbourne, and it seemed hardly worth while to explain that I was not eligible for a county-court judgeship. Few indeed are the appointments which in these democratic days can be bestowed, without questions asked, upon the nominee of a duke, even though that duke should be, as Hurstbourne was, the head of one of the old and formerly powerful Whig families, and I had common-sense enough to be aware that, if I was ever to earn my own bread and butter, I should have to do so by my own exertions. However, I did not wish to distress my kind-hearted little would-be benefactor by throwing doubts upon his ability to help me, and when we parted, he clapped me on the shoulder (he had to stand on tip-toe to do it), saying cheerily—

"Don't you be down on your luck, old man ; it will be all right. Just wait a bit until I've had time to get into the saddle, and you'll see that I sha'n't forget you.'

As I afterwards found out, he really did not forget me during the three or four ensuing weeks, although I am afraid I must confess that I forgot him : at all events, I did not think of him much or often. I did chance to hear, through the newspapers and from private sources, what his inheritance amounted to, and a very fine inheritance it sounded, notwithstanding the somewhat ungenerous will of the late duke, who, as had been anticipated, was found to have bequeathed the entire London property as well as a goodly portion of his northern estates to Mr. Paul Gascoigne. However, my young friend got Hurstbourne Castle, together with the lands appertaining thereto, which were estimated to bring in an income sufficient (as it appeared to me) for the maintenance of a magnate of the first water. I saw no reason to pity him ; and as I had at the moment many and great reasons for pitying myself, I relegated him to one of those back shelves in my memory which I do not generally examine except when I can't sleep at night.

I suppose Uncle John must have wanted very much indeed to get rid of me, and, all things considered, I can't say that I wonder at it ; but I still think that he might have attained his object without being so emphatically disagreeable and so disagreeably emphatic. Perhaps it is easier to forgive great injuries than small ones ; perhaps it would not be true to say that my uncle ever inflicted any real injury, great or small, upon me ; yet even now when I am independent of him and

cherish no grudge against him, I cannot recall the sharp speeches which he used to address to me in those days without feeling the blood mount into my cheeks and my eyes. I only remained on at the office day after day because it was necessary and because I could not, for the sake of asserting my personal dignity, throw the weight of supporting my great, useless body upon my poor old mother's already overburdened hands. I suppose Uncle John knew that, and it may be that he allowed a more free rein to his tongue in consequence. Well, it is all over, and it doesn't matter, and I admit that he is a very decent sort of man, as men go ; only of course my forbearance was exercised to little purpose, for when once that kind of thing begins the sooner the inevitable end comes the better.

In my case it came one afternoon when my uncle told me before all his clerks that I understood rather less of my business than the first crossing-sweeper whom he could pick up in the street. He had said worse things than that to me before ; but he had not said them in so public a manner, and it seemed to me that, under the circumstances, the only possible course open to me was that which I made haste to adopt. Shortly afterwards I walked away from the City a free man and a practically penniless one.

I was making for the club and was walking moodily along Piccadilly when a little man in beautifully-fitting black clothes—never in his life has Hurstbourne had a wrinkle about his person from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot—caught me by the arm, exclaiming, “Here’s luck ! You’re the very man I wanted to meet. Come and dine with me at the Clarence at eight o’clock, like a good fellow, will you ? I’m in a

deuce of a hurry now; but I've got something to say to you, and I'll say it this evening, if you'll come. Are you disengaged?"

I was disengaged and perhaps not disinclined to confide my woes to a sympathetic listener; so when—about twenty minutes after the appointed hour—he arrived at the very smart and modern club which he had named, he found me waiting for him there. He did not apologize for being late; but he apologized presently for the dinner and the wine, neither of which stood in need of any apology, and then he proceeded to apologize also for a proposal which he wished to make to me.

"I daresay," he began, in deprecating accents, "it isn't exactly what you would choose; but it's better than nothing, and it needn't be permanent, unless you like. The fact is that I have been talking to some of these big-wigs, and they all assure me that they can't do anything for a solicitor. Barristers, they say, they might be able to help; but I expect that's only because I wasn't asking them to help a barrister. Well, to cut a long story short, what I want you to do, if you will, is to manage my establishment and my expenditure for me. It's very evident to me that *somebody* must do it, or I shall soon get things into a rare mess. There's a land-steward and a house-steward and a lot of other rascals; but unless they have a gentleman over them, to keep them up to their bearings, they'll rob me right and left; and as soon as I realized this I made so bold as to think of you, Martyn. I really don't believe you would find it such a bad berth. You would live at Hurstbourne and have your own rooms—as many of 'em as you wanted

—and there would be horses for you to ride, and of course the shooting. I can't help thinking that a country-life would suit an athletic fellow like you better than office-work in this filthy town; besides which, you would have the comfort, which I know would be a very real comfort to you, of thinking that you were doing me the greatest possible service. I've no head for figures, you see, and my only chance of averting an appalling financial disaster is to commit my affairs to someone whom I can thoroughly trust."

He went into a few details, which certainly seemed to bear out his assertion that he was not very well qualified to take care of himself in a financial sense; he explained what my duties would be, and I did not think them beyond the range of my capacities; finally he named a salary so preposterously high that I could not in common honesty accept it. But I did, after some hesitation, accept the post offered to me. I knew very well that it was offered to me out of the kindness and generosity of his heart, and that, if I did not take it, the appointment would probably not be filled by anybody else; still, I hope I was not absolutely and entirely selfish in the matter. Looking back upon it, I am able to say with a clear conscience that I have been of some service to him and have earn'd my pay: even at the moment I might, perhaps, have resisted the temptation, powerful as it was, had I not foreseen that he would at least not be a loser by employing me.

He was so pleased by my consent to let him relieve me of the cares which had almost broken my heart that he jumped up from his chair to shake hands with me, knocking over a decanter and scandalizing the prim

waiter, who no doubt thought that he had drunk more wine than was good for him.

“ My dear old chap,” he exclaimed, “ this is awfully good of you, and I don’t know how to thank you enough. My mother will be delighted when she hears of it ; for she knows, if anybody does, that I am the worst hand in the world at keeping accounts. We really ought to have another bottle of fizz to celebrate this joyful occasion. Waiter, bring another bottle of that stuff which they have the cheek to call ’74 Giessler.”

As I am a Christian man, I left that club perfectly sober, yet perfectly convinced that I had behaved like a friend in need. And, indeed, I believe that such is the impression which my poor dear Hurstbourne invariably manages to convey to those whom he has befriended.

CHAPTER II.

NORA.

THE next morning I had a second interview with Hurstbourne, in the course of which my duties and responsibilities were somewhat more clearly defined for me than they had been on the previous evening. I was, it appeared, to be invested with plenary powers as regarded the management of the Hurstbourne Castle estate and establishment; I was to "get things straight," if I could; I was to effect any reductions which might have to be effected; above all, I was entreated not to let my young friend spend more money than he possessed.

"Because," said he ingenuously, "I know very well that that's what I shall do, unless you ride me in a rather sharp bit. I never could see such an awful lot of difference between a sovereign and a shilling, and I don't suppose I ever shall. But if you'll have the kindness just to take a good, strong pull at me when you think I'm getting my head up too much, it'll be all right. I don't want to be bothered about five-pound notes, you understand; but at the same time I don't want to come a cropper."

What he precisely did want was not easy to ascertain, nor, I suppose, were his own ideas particularly distinct as yet; only he had a very decided and not very un-

natural desire to get all the fun that he could for his money, and I gathered that, what with yachting, deer-stalking, and the claims of London society, he would not spend more than three or four months of the year at his ancestral castle.

“When I am at Hurstbourne, though, I shall make it lively for you,” he added encouragingly, “and when you’re alone—well, you’ll have the neighbors, and I daresay there will be work enough to keep you busy for a few hours every day, and in the winter you ought to get plenty of sport. Anyhow, you can but give the plan a trial and drop it if it doesn’t suit you.”

The plan was quite certain to suit me better than any other that could have been devised on my behalf, and I am sure he knew that, or he would never have asked me to undertake it. I said as much to him when we parted; but he scouted the idea of my having anything to thank him for, protesting loudly that the obligation was all the other way. So, as there was not much more to be said, and as he apparently had a great many engagements, I left him, promising to let him hear from me as soon as I should have taken up my abode at Hurstbourne Castle, and the same afternoon I journeyed down to Essex, in order to inform my mother of the change which had occurred in my fortunes.

My mother, I should mention, still lived in the neighborhood where we had been accustomed to reign supreme in the days of our prosperity. When the crash came, and when my father, by good luck, had found an immediate purchaser for Fern Hill in Lady Deverell, we had gone up to London for a time; but after his death my mother, having no ties elsewhere, had thought it best to return to the old county, and there she and my

sister Nora dwelt in a modest cottage, not more than a mile from what had formerly been our own park gates. It sounds like a rather painful arrangement, and perhaps it was so to Nora, but I don't think my mother felt it much. The truth is that, after our great misfortune, she never felt anything very much. All the same, there could be no doubt but that the news of my rupture with Uncle John would cause her pain and anxiety ; so that I was very thankful to be able to couple this announcement with another to the effect that I had obtained at least temporary employment of a much more remunerative character.

I found her seated in the little, shabbily-furnished drawing-room, and very frail and old and ill she looked, though she summoned up a smile to welcome me and did her best to disguise what was so evident—that she was in mortal terror lest this unexpected arrival of mine should portend some fresh calamity. There are people whom it makes one's heart ache to see deprived of the luxuries which seem to be their birthright—people upon whom comparative indigence entails as much actual suffering as positive want does upon those of more robust temperament—and my poor mother was one of these. She had been brought up in cotton-wool ; she had always been delicate and had always been assiduously taken care of ; never until her old age had she known what it was to lack every comfort that money could buy ; it was a perpetual miracle to me that she had had the physical strength to survive the successive blows which had shattered her small world into fragments. As for her uncomplaining courage, I did not wonder so much at that, for she was well-born, and that she should do her duty to the best of her

ability was no more than was to be expected of her.

The tiny white hands that held her knitting-pins trembled while I unfolded my tale, and so did the gray curls, which have been arranged after the same fashion on either side of her thin face since the year 1840 or thereabouts, for I am a clumsy, methodical fellow, and I can't unfold any tale unless I begin at the beginning ; but she did not interrupt me, and she heaved a long sigh of relief when she heard that, in spite of my ill-advised quarrel with her brother-in-law, I was not left without the means of earning my subsistence.

“I am sure you know best, Philip,” she said, when I had made an end of speaking, “and I daresay you will be happier at Hurstbourne Castle than you would have been in London ; but isn’t it a rather uncertain sort of prospect ?”

Well, of course it was that ; only, as I pointed out to her, Uncle John had offered me no prospect at all, except that of being assisted out into the street, if I did not adopt a more dignified plan of stepping over his threshold of my own accord. She was easily reassured, She had lost the power of looking far ahead ; probably also she thought, what ought to be quite true, that an able-bodied man is never in any real danger of starving. Naturally enough, she was less confident with regard to my sister’s future, and I was not surprised when she presently appealed to me to say what was to become of a girl who had been educated as a lady (and was consequently quite incompetent to educate others) in the event of her being left alone and penniless in the world. What indeed ! My mother had put this question to me many a time before, and never had I been able to make any satisfactory reply.

"Let us hope that she will marry," said I ; for I could hit upon nothing more original or more comforting to say.

"Yes," assented my mother, "that is what we must hope for ; and even if she should not make such a marriage as we might have thought desirable in old days, we must still be thankful that she has found a home. This afternoon she has gone over to Fern Hill to see Lady Deverell, who has been most kind to her. Lady Deverell is really a good, kind woman !"

My mother said this as if she rather expected to be contradicted, and, as a matter of fact, I did not altogether agree with her ; but, not wishing to be argumentative, I thought it would save time to inquire at once whether Lady Deverell had selected a husband for Nora. I obtained no reply, for at this moment my mother dropped her ball of wool, which she begged me to pick up for her, saying that the housemaid always made a point of entangling her legs in it when it was left on the floor ; and before I was off my knees Nora herself had come in.

As my sister Nora is one of the personages chiefly concerned in the simple narrative which I have undertaken to relate, I should be glad, if I could, to convey some accurate impression of her ; but my own impression of her is, I suppose, a good deal colored by fraternal partiality, and it may very well be that she did not appear such a strikingly pretty girl to everybody as she always appeared to me. Still I do think, that almost everybody would have admitted the fact of her prettiness if only in virtue of her dark blue eyes and long, curved eyelashes. Such eyes are unquestionably both rare and beautiful, and although the rest of her features may not have been absolutely perfect, she had the

advantage of a complexion above all criticism. Beauty, as we all know, admits of no closer definition than something at which we find pleasure in gazing; and I have reason to believe that I am by no means the only man who finds pleasure in gazing at my sister.

What seems to show that there must be something wrong about the above definition is that she found and expressed unbounded pleasure in gazing at me. And yet who can tell? It is not impossible that in her eyes my homely countenance may, by reason of her affection for me, have been glorified by some distant suggestion of that comeliness which Nature has denied to it. Anyhow, she was as glad to see me as I was to see her. "But, my dear Phil," said she presently, "you might have gone to the expense of a sixpenny telegram before bouncing in upon us like this. If I had only known you were coming, I wouldn't have promised to dine with Lady Deverell to-night. I'll tell you what you shall do, you shall come and dine there with me. It isn't a party, and she won't at all mind my bringing you; but, to make assurance doubly sure, I'll write her a line, saying that you are here for twenty-four hours—of course you can't have got leave for more than twenty-four hours—and that really I cannot do without you for a whole evening out of that short time."

I demurred to this proposition, because Lady Deverell was not exactly the sort of person with whom I felt inclined to take a liberty; but my mother rather eagerly backed Nora up, and the end of it was that, five minutes later, the boy who cleaned the knives and boots, and was supposed to weed the garden, was despatched to Fern Hill with a note. He returned before the dressing hour, bearing a scrawl in pencil from Lady Deverell,

which Nora handed to me :—“Very happy to see your brother, my dear. Sorry I have no lady for him.”

Poor people, and people who have seen better days, are doubtless apt to detect slights when perhaps none have been intended. I confess that I did not like what seemed to me to be a somewhat studied lack of ceremony on Lady Deverell’s part ; but then, for the matter of that, I did not like Lady Deverell ; and, after all, it was we, and not she, who had begun by being unceremonious.

At the risk of being suspected of a jealous prejudice against the two people who had done the most good in the parish since our losses had debarred my mother from taking any pecuniary share in works of charity, I will confess that, if we had a neighbor whom I disliked more than Lady Deverell, it was Mr. Burgess, our respected rector ; so that I was not overjoyed to find him standing in the well-known drawing-room, with his hands behind his back and his legs wide apart, just as he had been used to stand in the old days when he came to dine with us, and when his manner in addressing us had been so very different. He addressed me now in a tone of kindly patronage, holding out his fat hand, calling me, “ My young friend,” and expressing a hope that I was sticking to work.

“Work—work ! Nothing like work for keeping the body and the mind healthy, you may depend upon it,” he was pleased to say.

His body was unquestionably, not to say obtrusively, healthy ; I cannot answer for the state of his mind ; but in any case I really did not think, from what I knew of him, that he could have arrived at that pitch of happy certitude through personal experience of the means

recommended. Thirty years ago Mr. Burgess would, I imagine, have been a prominent Evangelical, for he was a stout, heavy man, with bushy eyebrows, a long upper lip and a great, foolish nose ; living in this later epoch, he had become known as a somewhat advanced High Churchman. He could not possibly make himself look the part, which was a pity ; but he had a fine sonorous voice, and his method of singing the service was admired by some people. Indeed to be quite fair, I believe there were also some people who admired his sermons. Just now he was entitled to the respectful sympathy of his parishioners, having recently suffered a severe bereavement in the death of his wife, who had left him with the cares of ministering to a large small family upon his hands.

Mr. Burgess, it appeared, was the only guest besides ourselves who had been invited to dine ; but there were a number of people staying in the house, none of whom struck me as being particularly interesting. Lady Devrell, who was as rich as she was pious, was given to hospitality ; but I imagine that she preferred entertaining those whom she could safely bully—old maids, missionaries at home on leave, and so forth. After dinner she put me through my facings in her usual abrupt, peremptory fashion. Why was I giving up my profession ? Didn't I think that, if there was any disagreement between my uncle and myself, the chances were in favor of the older and more experienced man being in the right ? Had my management of my own affairs been so successful that I could count with any certainty upon success in managing the affairs of a friend ? She drew herself up and looked more forbidding than ever when she heard who my friend was.

"Oh, indeed!" said she, in accents of cold displeasure. "I am not acquainted with the present Duke of Hurstbourne; but if he at all resembles his father, his house is not one in which I should wish to see any son of mine take up his abode."

I was sufficiently irritated to reply that I had never in my wildest dreams contemplated the honor of calling Lady Deverell my mother as a conceivable state of things, and that a man in my humble position could not, of course, aspire to her exclusiveness. Thereupon she stared at me for a moment and turned her back. She is a tall, gaunt woman, with a beaky nose, rather sunken black eyes and iron-gray hair. I do not think that I have ever been exactly afraid of her, but no doubt I should have been less uncivil to her if she had been less alarming.

Moreover, I was, I must own, in a rather bad temper at the time, having other reasons besides my hostess's impertinence for feeling annoyed. I did not like, and I never had liked, Mr. Burgess's manner with my sister. Of course he was old enough to be her father, and he had baptized her and prepared her for confirmation and all that; still, there was something about his ponderous and paternal playfulness in addressing her which had always been offensive to me, and which I could not help thinking was displayed to an unusual extent that evening. It would have been as absurd to accuse this elderly clerical widower of flirtation as to connect any idea of delicate innuendo with a bluebottle fly; still, I was so provoked by the way in which he kept buzzing round Nora that I took her away at the earliest possible moment, on the plea that, as I had to leave home the next morning, I wished to see as much as I

could of my family before going to bed. Mr. Burgess followed us into the hall and was anxious to drive us home in his pony chaise, but I firmly declined his proffered courtesy, declaring that, on such a lovely night, we should both of us much prefer to walk home across the fields.

“I can’t imagine,” said I, as we passed out of the garden into the park together (for in my unreasonable, masculine way I was a little vexed with Nora, as well as with the Rector), “what pleasure you can find in listening to the oily egotism of that old bore.”

“Can’t you?” she returned, without meeting my eyes. “But—did I say I found any pleasure in it?”

“No; you didn’t say so,” I admitted; “but really anybody who had watched you with him to-night might have thought you did. His spirits don’t seem to have been much affected by his loss. I suppose the next thing we shall hear will be that he has appointed some worthy successor to the vacant place in his affections.”

“Yes,” agreed Nora absently; “I shouldn’t wonder.”

Unlike Mr. Burgess, Nora was evidently out of spirits. She did not listen to what I said; she did not laugh at the time-honored jokes with which we had been in the habit of diverting one another from our infancy, and which I had never before known to pall upon either of us. It was only when I reminded her of that memorable occasion on which the old cab-horse—a designation conferred by us upon our esteemed pastor in compliment to certain peculiarities of action—had slipped up while ambling down the chancel, and had seated himself with a resounding crash upon the tiles, displaying the soles of his immense feet to his flock—it was

only then, I say, that she roused herself from her abstraction, and suddenly laid her hand upon my arm.

“Phil,” said she, “I don’t want you to call Mr. Burgess the old cab-horse any more; I don’t want you to say anything disagreeable about him, if you can help it. Because—don’t look at me, please—because—I am going to marry him.”

I don’t remember what answer I made; but I suppose I must have said that such a thing was impossible, and added some strong expressions; for I remember how gently and patiently the poor girl exerted herself, as we walked on, to make me understand that she had taken a step from which she had no intention of receding. She did not pretend to be enamoured of Mr. Burgess—that would have been a little too ridiculous—but she assured me that he expected nothing of the sort, that the prospect of keeping house for him and looking after his children was not such a very disagreeable one to her, that he had been extremely kind, as had also Lady Deverell, who approved of the match, and that my mother’s consent had been willingly given.

“But, gracious Heavens!” I exclaimed, “if it is necessary for you to marry somebody—which I suppose is what you mean—aren’t there dozens of other men in England who would be only too glad to marry you? Besides, the old wretch has only just buried his wife. To my mind, his conduct is downright indecent!”

“The dozens of men who are so eager to marry me haven’t found their way into Essex,” answered Nora, with a faint smile; “and, as for the wedding, there won’t be any indecent haste about it. Mr. Burgess wishes me to take my own time, and says he would rather our engagement was not formally announced yet.

Indeed, I hope—I mean I think—that he will not ask me to leave home while mamma lives."

"Is that it?" I asked, with a quick pang of apprehension. "Is she worse, then?"

"Yes, much worse. She didn't want you to know, because she said there was no use in distressing you; but about a month ago she was very ill for a few days, and the doctor told me plainly that in cases of heart-disease, like hers, the end may come at any moment. Only it is quite possible that she may live on for years, if we can save her from worry and anxiety. Now, do you understand, Phil? Of course she is anxious and worried now, not knowing how you will take this news, and you must pretend to be pleased—anyhow, to be resigned. I don't ask you to be pleased with me, and if you can't help being disgusted with me—well, you can't help it. But you won't say so before her, will you?"

I had to give the pledge required of me; I didn't see at the time, and I don't see now, how I could have acted otherwise. Nevertheless, I said to myself very decidedly that, if Mr. Burgess ever married my sister, it should be no fault of mine. It was bad enough that, for the present and for my mother's sake, he must be allowed to consider himself engaged to her.

"Don't look so miserable, Phil," said Nora; "it will all come right in the end, you'll see."

And I could not but wonder whether, in the inmost recesses of her heart, her intentions with regard to the good Rector might not, perhaps, be as perfidious as my own.

CHAPTER III.

HIS GRACE AND HIS MOTHER.

AFTER what had been told me I anticipated a rather painful interview with my mother, and it is not unlikely that she may have anticipated a painful interview with me. If so, it was, I hope, as great a relief to her as it was to me to find our respective apprehensions groundless. Wonderfully little passed between us upon the subject of Nora's proposed marriage. She said, with an appealing glance at me, that she believed all had been arranged for the best, and I refrained from putting forward a contrary opinion; then something was said about Nora's love for children, and the respect and affection with which she had always regarded Mr. Burgess; it was further stated by one of us, and assented to by the other, that a considerable disparity of age between husband and wife constitutes no necessary drawback to matrimonial felicity; finally, the paramount importance of securing a home for one who might any day be left destitute was recognized on both sides; after which we hastened to speak about other matters. I suppose the truth was that we were both heartily ashamed of ourselves.

And yet my mother, poor old lady, had no such great reason to feel ashamed. This preposterous union had

not, as I gathered, been suggested or promoted by her ; Lady Deverell and Mr. Burgess appeared to have done the courtship between them, and the responsibility of having brought it to a successful issue rested upon them, in so far as it did not rest upon Nora herself.

“ But the whole thing has really been my own doing, Phil,” Nora declared, when I gave expression to the above sentiment before taking leave of her. “ I don’t want to beg my bread, and I don’t know how to earn it ; so——”

She shrugged her shoulders and made a grimace which, I daresay, was intended to convince me what a heartless and selfish little cynic she was.

That was not the impression produced upon me by it, for her eyes were swimming in tears, and I knew her too well to suspect her of heartlessness or selfishness ; but what could I do, except answer in a hurried and shamefaced manner that I supposed beggars must not be choosers ? If I had spoken kindly to her, she would only have broken down, which would have done neither her nor me nor my mother any good. As I said before, I was resolved not to let her marry old Burgess ; but I believe I was wrong in hinting, at the end of the last chapter, that she herself had any *arrière-pensée* in the matter, beyond a not unpardonable desire to put off the evil day as long as might be. The sacrifice which she contemplated is one which is made by hundreds—thousands, perhaps—of women every year, and since the results are seldom openly tragic, no doubt their examples encourage the others. I should not think, however, that there can be many men to whom the idea of marriage without love is anything short of inherently repulsive.

This being so, and the circumstances admitting of no immediate action on my part, I was glad to turn away from the connection of any such thought with my sister ; for the first time in my life I was glad to leave her and to betake myself to Hurstbourne Castle, where, as it turned out, there was plenty of work waiting for me with which to occupy my mind.

Hurstbourne Castle ought, perhaps, rather to be known as Hurstbourne Palace, for it certainly is not a castle in the strict sense of the word, having been built in the sixteenth century upon the site of the ancient feudal structure which was demolished to make way for it. The late Duke (so I have been told by a lady who knew him) once remarked that it was a fine place to look at, and suitable for purposes of entertainments on a large scale, but that he should be sorry to be condemned to live there. As a matter of fact he did not live there, preferring the adjacent estate of Lavenham, which he had purchased, and where there was a large modern house surrounded by gardens, upon the cultivation of which he had expended a small fortune. Hurstbourne he had been accustomed to make use of two or three times in the course of the year for the purpose just mentioned, and possibly his dislike for the place may have been connected with his well-known dislike for entertaining upon a large scale. His enormous wealth enabled him to maintain an enormous establishment in a residence which he so rarely visited ; and thus it did not present a deserted or uncared-for appearance, although the general effect of it was a trifle gloomy and depressing during the winter months.

It was on a fine, hot afternoon in one of the finest and hottest summers of recent years that I first made

acquaintance with my future place of abode, and it certainly struck me that any duke who could not be satisfied with such a glorious and beautiful home must be an uncommonly hard duke to please. For the vast Tudor building, which is pronounced by competent judges to be as perfect a specimen of that order of architecture as there is in existence, stands high, dominating a boundless expanse of park, where fallow-deer and Highland cattle can scarcely be conscious of any sense of captivity, and the timber is more magnificent than anything that I know of elsewhere, and in the month of June the admiring spectator is seldom reminded of the proximity of the storm-swept German ocean. The number of people who cannot stand country-life unless they are supported by the presence of a crowd of fellow-creatures is, I know, large and increasing ; but personally I am incapable of entering into their feelings. I was brought up in the country ; I love it and everything belonging to it, be the weather fair or foul ; added to which I am not, and never was, fitted to shine in society. Consequently, I was by no means scared at the prospect of a prolonged period of solitude ; nor, when I was shown the very comfortable quarters which had been prepared for my reception, did I see any reason to regret my stuffy little London lodgings.

There is no occasion to weary the reader with a detailed account of the affairs which it was now my duty to take in hand or of the obstacles in my path which I had to surmount or push aside ; I will only say, with regard to those obstacles, that they proved far less numerous than I had anticipated, and that there was every excuse for the old retainers who at

first showed some disposition to be obstructive. New brooms cannot expect to be welcomed; it was, of course, probable that the young duke, being so much less wealthy than his predecessor, would wish to cut down expenses, and a servant who for many years has been well paid in return for very little work naturally does not relish the idea of dismissal. However, my present instructions were to dismiss nobody, and, after a long and careful study of the documents submitted to me, I was able to arrive at the highly satisfactory conclusion that nobody needed to be dismissed. Stewards, bailiffs, gamekeepers, and house-servants, they were all respectful and civil to me from the outset: as soon as they understood that I did not contemplate any sweeping reforms, they became my very good friends, and did what they could to assist me in the carrying out of those which I deemed imperative. There was, to be sure, rather a superfluity of dependents; still, Hurstbourne's means were ample enough to justify him in retaining their services—always supposing, that is, that he did not squander his means in London or elsewhere.

“I do hope, sir,” said the house-steward, a grave, gray-headed personage, “that we shall see his Grace here before the autumn. I should think, sir, that his Grace would reside chiefly at Hurstbourne, now that Lavenham has gone away from the family.”

I could give no information as to the new owner's plans, seeing that I did not possess any. “But Lavenham hasn't gone away from the family, has it?” I asked. “I understood that it had been left to Mr. Paul Gascoigne.”

“Yes, sir, yes; the property was left to Mr. Paul,”

answered the house-steward, with an air of discreet reserve. "I meant that the property had been left away from his Grace. I am sorry for it, sir, if I may make so bold as to say so. I fear that his Grace's influence in the county may be diminished, and that some folks will be inclined to look upon Mr. Paul Gascoigne as the head of the family—which he is *not*, sir."

From this as well as from other hints which were dropped in my presence, I was led to infer that Mr. Paul Gascoigne had not won the affections of his late uncle's retainers; but I asked no questions, not caring to discuss such delicate matters with those amongst whom it was obviously essential to maintain a strict standard of discipline. I will say for them that they, on their side, abstained from questioning me more than they could help, great though their curiosity must naturally have been to hear something about the young head of the family, upon whom none of them had set eyes during his uncle's lifetime. I gave them such information as I could; I told them that he was of a generous disposition, that he was a good sportsman, that he had many friends, and, to the best of my belief, no enemies. More than that I could not tell them, because that was all, or almost all, that I myself knew about him. I was not going to mention certain misgivings which, as time went on, began to trouble me, owing to the accounts which I received from him of his expenditure.

For he did appear to me to be going the pace somewhat faster than was prudent. No doubt it was necessary that he should have a London residence, since the family mansion in Park Lane had passed into his

cousin's possession, and he may have done well to purchase a large house and furniture in Berkeley Square which happened to be in the market just then; but I should have been better pleased if he had waited a while before treating himself to a five-hundred-ton steam yacht and a deer-forest in Scotland, while his casual intimation that he proposed ere long to set up a racing-stable filled me with dismay. It was not that there was anything out of the way in a man of his income owning such luxuries—or, at all events, some of them; only, his uncle having left him literally without one penny in hard cash, I did not see how houses and yachts and deer-forests, not to speak of racing-studs, were to be paid for without the negotiation of a considerable loan. Now, the negotiation of loans did not come within the scope of my department, so that I had to content myself with warning him that, so far as I could calculate the cost of his present scale of living, his bankers' book would show but a small balance at the end of the year. He replied by return of post that that was first-rate. "Balance indeed! Who wants a big balance?" he asked; and as I read the words I seemed to hear the jolly laugh with which they had been written.

Hurstbourne has a clear, ringing laugh which I would defy the most saturnine of mortals to resist. When he indulges in it he shuts his eyes and throws back his head, displaying a fine double row of white teeth, and in another moment everybody within ear-shot of him has begun to grin or chuckle. No doubt he was at that time doing a great deal towards promoting the general hilarity in London; for, judging by the reports which penetrated to our northern re-

gions during that period of jubilee, he was taking part in every species of obtainable amusement. Under the circumstances, he could not, without obvious hypocrisy, have pretended to lament his deceased uncle, and nobody, I believe, has ever thought of accusing Hurstbourne of hypocrisy.

When the London season was at an end, he betook himself, as was to be expected, to Goodwood and Cowes, and I presumed that he would proceed from thence to Scotland. I was, therefore, both pleased and surprised when, towards the middle of August, I received a notification from him to the effect that he was coming home, accompanied by his mother, and that he hoped the spare bedrooms were all right, because he had asked a lot of people down to stay. The spare bedrooms were all right, and indeed everything in the house was all right, the late owner having, it appeared, been in the habit of allowing *carte blanche* to the housekeeper in the matter of necessary renewals of furniture, and having also had the decency to let the furniture go with the title ; so that the only thing I had to think about was the organizing of a suitable reception for the new Duke.

Aided by the steward, the bailiff, and others, I was able to arrange this to my satisfaction. The tenantry turned out on horseback, triumphal arches were erected, a holiday was accorded to the school-children, and shortly before the appointed hour I arrived at the Lavenham Road station, with an illuminated address tucked under my arm, which Mr. Higgins, the senior tenant, who was to present it, had entrusted to me, explaining that when he mounted his young mare he preferred to have the free use of both hands. I was

quite astonished to see such a crowd upon the platform, where I became aware of many faces hitherto unknown to me, nor could I account for the presence of half-a-dozen strange servants attired in the Gascoigne livery; but when Mr. Higgins, very red in the face after his ride, joined me, he cleared up the mystery, and gave me information as to what he and I agreed was a somewhat awkward *contretemps*. Mr. Paul Gascoigne, it seemed, had selected this day of all others for taking formal possession of his property; he was coming down in the same train with the Duke; for him also triumphal arches had been set up; his tenantry, like ours, had assembled to welcome him; and the worst of it was that he had a much larger array of tenants than his cousin could boast of.

"He have done it o' purpose, sir," the old man said, adding some forcible expressions which, as Mr. Higgins is a church-warden, I forbear to record. "His nature is to spoil sport, and true to his nature he will be, so long as there's life in the ugly carcase of him, you may depend. Now, I ain't got no quarrel with them as is bound to receive him proper, but it do grieve me to think that his Grace must drive away from this station in a carriage and pair, when that there feller has got four horses and postillions waiting for him."

We might have had four horses, and I was sorry that I had not thought of it; but there was no time to make any alteration in the arrangements, so I stated boldly that the Prince of Wales habitually sat behind a pair, and that, in these days of macadamized roads, leaders were considered as not only useless, but as savoring of vulgar ostentation.

I don't know whether Mr. Higgins was satisfied, but

I know that I was not ; and when the train drew up beside the platform and Hurstbourne stepped out of a saloon carriage, I saw at once by his face that he, too, was a little bit annoyed. He was followed by a stout lady, whose hair was of that peculiar golden tint which has never yet been known to grow naturally upon a human scalp, and to whom he introduced me, saying : " You ought to be acquainted with my mother, Martyn, for she has been acquainted with you by repute for a very long time."

She had a good-natured face, and she said a few kindly words to me as she shook hands ; but she manifested quite plainly the vexation which her son was making gallant efforts to disguise.

The next person to emerge from the train was a tall, thin, clean-shaven man with an eyeglass, whose identity was immediately revealed by the somewhat uncalled-for haste with which his henchmen pushed forward to greet him. I could not altogether agree with Mr. Higgins that his carcase was an ugly one, although I did not much like the look of him. He wore a depreciating and faintly-amused air, as who should say, " I am really very sorry to have put anyone to inconvenience ; but it is no fault of mine. I can't help it, my dear cousin, if I am a bigger man than you, and I can't prevent all these good people from displaying their natural affection for me."

I believe he actually did say something almost as bad as that to Hurstbourne, on taking leave of him, after they had received and responded to their respective addresses and were moving towards the exit, amidst an outburst of cheering which, let us hope, was meant to be divided impartially between them.

"I must say," exclaimed Lady Charles, as we seated ourselves in the carriage, "that that man's impudence is past all bearing! Anybody else would have felt ashamed of having schemed to defraud a relation of his rights; but he positively glories in it. Thank Heaaven he hasn't got the title!—though, I believe, if he could see his way to get it by poisoning you without risk of detection, he would."

"Oh, come, mother," said Hurstbourne, laughing, "he isn't so bad as all that, and I daresay he didn't scheme. But he's an irritating beggar, I admit, and I don't think it was very pretty of him to come down and take the shine out of us in this way."

"We'll take the shine out of him before we've done with him," returned Lady Charles in a resolute voice.

Lady Charles Gascoigne was a vulgar woman, and the vulgarity of her mind was destined to cause me much subsequent annoyance, because I did not think that the influence which she exercised over Hurstbourne was a salutary one; but it is mere justice to her to own that she was kind-hearted, and that, according to her lights, she had been a good wife and mother. The only daughter of a rich Birmingham merchant, she had cheerfully acquiesced in the squandering of her fortune by her husband, and had as cheerfully submitted to privations in order that her son might be enabled to associate with his equals. I am sure she would have cut off her right hand to serve him; if she did not know how to serve him wisely, perhaps she was not to blame for her incapacity. Later in the evening, when our stately progress had been accomplished without a hitch, and the tenants had been refreshed, and Hurstbourne had addressed them in a

neat little speech, she was so good as to take an opportunity of morally patting me on the head.

“His Grace,” said she (it was one of her provoking habits to speak always of her son in that absurd way), “has a great esteem for you, Mr. Martyn, and I do feel that we are much indebted to you for all the trouble that you have taken. It is such an immense blessing in a large establishment like this to have a gentleman to whom one can give instructions, and who will see that they are properly carried out. His Grace, as you know, is by no means as rich as he ought to be ; still, he is very desirous of entertaining his visitors in a style befitting his rank, and I am sure you will understand how vexed he would be if his cousin, who, I believe, is going to have a large house-party next week, were to outdo him in any way.”

I certainly did not think that it would be worth his Grace’s while to outdo in the matter of splendor a man who was notoriously far more wealthy than he ; but I only bowed and held my peace. What disquieted me more than Lady Charles’s ambition was a remark which fell from Hurstbourne himself, while we were sitting in the smoking-room after she had gone to bed.

“I’ve no quarrel with that fellow Paul,” said he, “and I’m not going to quarrel with him so long as he chooses to keep friends ; but I don’t mean him to ride rough-shod over me either, and if he tries that on, I expect there will be a fight.”

Now, Hurstbourne was a combative little man, and, considering what the respective situations of the rivals were, it seemed not unlikely that his combative ness might assert itself after a very foolish fashion.

CHAPTER IV.

A HOUSE-WARMING.

ON the following morning Hurstbourne and I went out for a ride together. He said he wanted to have a look at his new dominions, and certainly he could not have made acquaintance with them under more favorable conditions for a light wind was blowing from the eastward, which tempered the heat of the sun, and the whole face of Nature wore so smiling and peaceful an aspect that we might almost have fancied ourselves as many miles south of London as we actually were north of that grimy, sweltering city. Our horses, having for a long time past done no work beyond their daily walking exercise, were fat, and out of condition ; so that they gave us no trouble, and we could chat quite comfortably as we jogged across the grass. Hurstbourne, with his mouth open, kept on drawing long breaths of the salt-laden breeze into his lungs and heaving little sighs of contentment.

“ This is something like ! ” said he. “ This is better than Hyde Park, and a very great deal better than stifling ballrooms. I wish I could live here all my days, like a country gentleman, and perhaps run up to town for a couple of months or so in the season.”

"I wish you would," I replied; "and I know no earthly reason why you shouldn't."

He shook his head and assured me that there were lots of reasons why such a scheme of existence must be regarded as impracticable in his case. "I don't want to be an absolute cipher," he explained; "I don't think a Duke of Hurstbourne ought to be that. My uncle, to be sure, lived his own life and didn't bother himself much about politics or society; but, then, he was so beastly rich that it wasn't possible to disregard him, and he knew very well that he could make his power felt at any moment, if he chose. It's rather different with me, you see; I must keep myself pretty prominently before the eyes of the world or I shall sink into downright insignificance."

I asserted somewhat hastily that a duke can never be an insignificant personage; but he responded by naming one or two wearers of the strawberry-leaves to whom I had to admit that the adjective applied, and he added that he was not desirous of swelling that inglorious list. "My mother," said he, "saw from the first how it would be; and a sharp fellow like you has most likely discovered already that my mother has a head upon her shoulders."

I had been sharp enough to discover that Lady Charles Gascoigne had a singularly foolish head upon her shoulders, but naturally I did not hint at anything so impolite as that. I merely inquired in what particular fashion her ladyship desired that her son should render himself prominent.

"Oh, not in one way more than in another," he answered; "only she sees what you yourself must have seen yesterday that Paul Gascoigne means to over-

shadow me, if he can, and she thinks I should be an ass to submit to it. So do I, for the matter of that."

Being unable to concur in such sentiments, I held my tongue, and he went on to eulogize his mother in terms which were half painful, half comical, to a disinterested hearer. He did not stop at declaring her to be the cleverest woman of his acquaintance ; as I am a sinful man, he proceeded to praise her personal beauty, the remarkable youthfulness of her appearance, and her unerring good taste ! Often and often have I wondered whether Hurstbourne's filial affection and admiration were in reality what they were ostensibly. One knows how a man will take you into his stables and defiantly forestall criticism by claiming points for his horses which are the very points that they lack. " You imagine," he seems to say, " that that animal is not well ribbed back, or that the foreleg upon which you have fixed your eye shows signs of a splint ; but let me tell you that you are utterly and ridiculously mistaken."

Perhaps one thinks that he ought to know best ; in any case, one refrains from saying what one has been going to say. But, upon the whole, I really do believe that Hurstbourne was sincere. It is his nature to be like that ; his geese are swans ; the people whom he loves cannot do wrong, and I am afraid also that the few people whom he hates cannot do right.

It was plain enough that he hated his cousin. He did not say so ; but he gave me to understand as much, and I gathered that the large and influential assemblage which he was about to entertain was intended to be in some sort a slap in the face to the neighboring potentate. He furnished me with a list—and a very imposing list, it was—of the guests who were to arrive

that day and the next. There were two Cabinet Ministers among them, and a host of lords and ladies, some of whose names were familiar to me, while others, as I learnt from him, were stars of the first magnitude in that system which revolves round a royal sun.

“I’m going to make a sort of house-warming business of it, don’t you know,” said he. “One is bound to have a house-warming, eh? Anyhow my mother thinks so, and her idea is to give a big dinner to the neighbors, followed by a ball. She has found out that there’s no ballroom at Lavenham; so we ought to score one there.”

This sounded very feminine, and, whatever Hurstbourne may be, he is not a feminine person; but who doesn’t know the disastrous effects of feminine influence upon the best men? It is, in fact, upon the best of men, I think, that such influence proves the most deteriorating; only a downright brute can boast that he is his wife’s master. Lady Charles, it is true, was not Hurstbourne’s wife; but he was such a good fellow that a mother was almost as bad as a wife to him. So there was evidently nothing for it but to engage in this contemptible contest, and as soon as we returned to the house I had an interview with the housekeeper, who informed me that she had already been in consultation with her ladyship.

Neither then nor at any subsequent time was I brought into collision with her ladyship. Her notions with regard to entertaining were somewhat magnificent; but then it was quite right, and indeed inevitable, that if Hurstbourne was to entertain at all, he should do so in a magnificent style. There was money enough to meet current expenses, there was plenty of wine in the

cellars, and it was not my business—at any rate for the present—to protest against such orders as had been given. The exalted personages who proceeded to take up their quarters with us were not, I trust, dissatisfied with the board and lodging provided for them, nor, with such an army of well-trained domestics at command, was there any difficulty about making them comfortable. Of course I kept out of their way as much as I could. I was only a sort of upper servant, though my dear old Hurstbourne was at great pains to explain to each and all of them that I was under his roof in the character of a tried and valued friend. I don't for a moment suppose that they believed him; still they were kind enough to refrain from trampling upon me, and I had to play lawn-tennis with some of them, no sport being obtainable at that time of year for the employment of their leisure hours.

The big dinner proved, all things considered, a big success. The lord-lieutenant of the county and the other local celebrities, great and small, were present at it; they were charmed, as well they might be, with their genial host; they did not seem to be much shocked by their genial hostess; and my only reason for speaking in qualified terms of the triumph of the feast is that Mr. Paul Gascoigne was one of those who sat down to it. I frankly confess that I am unable to draw an impartial portrait of Mr. Paul Gascoigne. All I can find to say for him is that he is a gentleman of unblemished reputation, that he has earned a high character for benevolence, and that he is one of those wealthy and respectable mediocrities from whom the rank and file of British Statesmen are commonly recruited. He is irrevocably destined to be a Secretary of

State one of these fine days. Unfortunately he is one of those people—everybody is acquainted with a few such—who have always been personally abhorrent to me: people whom one cannot greet in the ordinary manner without an almost irresistible longing to rub one's hand vulgarly afterwards upon one's trousers; people to whom one cannot manage to speak civilly, although one has no excuse whatsoever for describing them as scoundrels. I have said already that he was tall, thin, clean-shaven and that he wore an eyeglass; I may add now that he was rather good-looking than otherwise, and that he had a clear, not unmelodious voice. To what the prompt aversion which I conceived for him was due I cannot explain, because I don't know. It was not, at all events, due to his air of slightly contemptuous patronage nor even to the irritating way in which he made himself at home and seized opportunities of addressing each of the servants by name.

Hurstbourne Castle had, as a matter of fact, been his home for many years, and he was perhaps entitled to remind us of the circumstance. However, if I had not already hated him in the earlier part of the evening, I daresay I should have done so when the ladies left us after dinner and when he deliberately set to work to provoke his cousin.

“How are you getting on with the good people hereabouts, Arthur,” he inquired, dangling his eyeglass on his forefinger and adopting very much the tone which a good-natured sixth form boy might adopt in addressing a youngster. “You'll find the farmers rather a hard-headed lot to deal with; though my impression of them—and of course I know them pretty well—is

that their Radicalism is only skin-deep. Still you must take them the right way if you want to do any good with them."

"I haven't spoken to them about that sort of thing," answered Hurstbourne; "but perhaps, if I had, I shouldn't have tried to convert them from what you call Radicalism."

"My dear fellow, you surely don't mean to say that you yourself are a Radical. That would be very funny."

"Would it? Well, I don't suppose I am so funny as that. I have always been a Liberal, like the rest of our family," said Hurstbourne, who, I am sure, had never in his life been guilty of holding any political opinions whatsoever.

"The rest of our family? Oh, if you mean my uncle, I can assure you that he was as good a Tory as I am; although, for the sake of old traditions, he called himself a Liberal Unionist. For my own part, I don't think it is over wise or honest to use thin disguises and that is why I proclaim myself openly as being what I am."

"Well, as long as you do that, nobody is likely to question your wisdom or your honesty," remarked Hurstbourne, cutting short the harangue upon which an elderly statesman who was seated beside him had embarked. "We mustn't begin to talk politics, or we shan't get out of the room in time to receive the dancing people. What are you drinking?"

"Port, thanks. This is the '47 of course. I was so glad to let you have it. I have some of the same vintage at Lavenham; but, as I always used to tell my uncle, it hasn't matured in the same way. I only wish it had!"

"I paid your own price for it, you know," Hurstbourne said.

"Oh yes, you paid me what I asked. One can't really put a price upon such wine as this; but I felt that it would be a positive sin to disturb it."

He leant back in his chair and held his glass up to the light, closing one eye while he scrutinized its contents. "Ah I thought so!" he sighed; "it has been a little bit shaken. I remonstrated with Feltham again and again about his carelessness in carrying up wine but it was no use, and finally I had to make a point of doing it myself. The fact is that one can't trust the best butler in the world with these delicate operations. You will find Feltham a very good, steady man in other respects, though."

Hurstbourne, who is too thorough a gentleman to resent any impertinence on the part of a guest, kept his temper admirably. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that he longed to kick the fellow; and so did I. That we were not alone in entertaining such sentiments was made evident to me by the tightened lips and lowered brows of the country gentlemen who formed the majority of the assemblage. While we were leaving the room, one of these, a spare, gray-bearded individual, whom I subsequently discovered to be Colonel Corbin, the M. F. H., told me how glad he had been to hear that the duke was a hunting as well as a shooting man.

"In the old duke's time," said he, "that beggar Paul Gascoigne had things all his own way, and the consequence was that we never drew these coverts except for form's sake. I wish to Heaven we hadn't got him at Lavenham; but it's something that he doesn't rule the roast hereabouts any more."

“ Mr. Gascoigne doesn’t hunt, then ? ” said I interrogatively.

“ He ? —Lord bless your soul, no ! he wouldn’t risk his precious person in that way. He can shoot, or he thinks he can—well, I believe he *is* a pretty fair shot. But he’s no sportsman, as I’ve taken the liberty of telling him more than once.”

From this and from other remarks which were made to me during the evening I was led to conclude that Mr. Gascoigne enjoyed no greater popularity amongst his equals in the county than he did amongst his inferiors. Yet money is power, and if the men, or some of them, fought shy of him, the ladies appeared to like him very well. I watched him from the retired position which I had taken up in a corner of the ball-room, and I saw that the old women welcomed him eagerly, while such of the young ones as he was pleased to dance with evidently exerted themselves to earn his approval. He was, however, a bad dancer, and probably he did not care enough about any of the young ladies to exhibit himself under an unbecoming aspect for their benefit. Long before the supper hour he ceased to adventure himself in the throng and sauntered down the long room, pausing every now and again to address a few condescending words to this or that person among the lookers-on, until he reached the spot where I was standing, when he was good enough to lean against the wall by my side and enter into conversation. “ Am I to compliment you upon this brilliant transformation scene, Mr. Martyn ? ” he inquired. “ You are playing Mentor to Arthur’s Telemachus, I am told, and certainly I can’t imagine that either he or his mother possess the decorative skill of which we see so many evi-

dences around us. It is difficult to believe that this is really the same old Hurstbourne Castle which my uncle and I used to regard as the dreariest of our abodes."

I said that the credit of having arranged the floral display which he admired was due, I believed, to the head-gardener, and I added, that my duties were not of the nature alluded to.

"No? That is almost a pity, I think; for if the entertaining department is to be confided to Lady Charles, I am afraid we shall not always have such cause to congratulate ourselves as we have to-night. There she is, and we must make the best of her; but who her friends are, and what sort of people she will invite to stay in the house, one shrinks from conjecturing. She appears to be a worthy kind of woman in her way, though. Has she got Arthur completely under her thumb, do you think?"

I replied that I really didn't know, but that a man of Hurstbourne's age is usually assumed to be out of leading strings.

"Oh, but that is a very unwarrantable assumption," he rejoined, laughing. "Arthur, I should say, would always be in leading-strings, and I was rather in hopes that you held them. I suppose he wouldn't listen to good advice from me; but he stands sorely in need of good advice from somebody, I assure you. He is trying, you see, to make a pint-pot hold a quart, which is an experiment that has never yet been crowned with success, often as it has been attempted. He may hold on for a year or two if he doesn't bet; but of course he will bet. I am sorry for it—especially as it won't be in my power to help him by buying this estate, which is entailed—but, *quos Deus vult perdere*—"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away, leaving me with a firm conviction that he had meant me to report those last words of his to Hurstbourne and with an equally firm determination that I would do no such thing. He would have alarmed me more if his malevolence had not been so obvious ; still, even as it was, he did contrive to make me feel uneasy. The deer-forest and the yacht and the home entertainments were all very well ; but when a man takes to owning race-horses and backing them, who can fix any limit to his possibilities ?

My somewhat gloomy meditations were presently interrupted by the subject of them, who came running across the room to ask me what in the world I meant by not dancing. " You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you lazy beggar ! Come along and be introduced to the youth and beauty of the neighborhood."

But I was not destined to become acquainted with the youth and beauty of the neighborhood that evening ; for he had not towed me a dozen paces before we were intercepted by a servant, who handed me a telegram which, he said, had just been brought from the station. I knew instinctively that it had come from Nora ; I knew what its contents must be, and when I tore it open my worst fears were verified. I showed it to Hurstbourne, who glanced at the urgent summons which it conveyed—" *Come home at once. Mother is very ill,*"—and who, like the good, kind fellow that he is, wasted no time in uttering commonplace condolences, but took prompt measures for having me sent off to Lavenham Road to catch the night mail.

" They'll stop it by signal for you," said he ; " one

of the grooms shall gallop over in a minute or two to tell them. You'll have plenty of time to pack up what things you want—a good half-hour. Good-bye, old chap ; let me have a line when you can, and of course don't dream of coming back here until you can leave home with a quiet mind. We're off to Scotland next week ; but I hope I shall see you again before very long."

So we parted ; and as I was being driven rapidly across the park in the dog-cart, it seemed to me by no means improbable that I had turned my back upon Hurstbourne Castle forever.

CHAPTER V.

THE SOLUTION OF A DIFFICULTY.

IT was very good and thoughtful of Hurstbourne to have the night mail stopped for me ; but in reality the station-master's complaisance did not save me much time ; for I had to go up to London, and, when there, I was compelled to wait several hours before the early morning train left for Essex. The delay, however, was of small consequence, and indeed that was what I kept on saying to myself while I paced wearily up and down the platform at Liverpool Street. I had read between the lines of my sister's telegram, I had guessed that her wish had been to spare me an unnecessary shock, and when, between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, I reached my destination at last and saw that all the blinds of our poor little cottage were drawn down, there was no need for the sobbing incoherence of the housemaid to convince me that all was over.

Nora, who evidently had not taken her clothes off all night, came downstairs presently to tell me all about it, in a quiet, miserable voice. There was not much to tell.—She had been out rather late on the previous afternoon, and, on her return, had found our mother sitting, as usual, in her arm-chair and apparently asleep.

Something about the attitude of the frail little figure had alarmed her ; her efforts to restore animation had failed ; and then she had sent for the doctor, although long before he appeared, there had been no doubt as to the nature of his verdict.

“ I didn’t like to tell you what had happened,” Nora said in conclusion, “ because I knew how dreadfully you would feel it, and it seemed a pity that you should be made unhappy through all that long journey, with nobody to speak a word of comfort to you. But you must try to take comfort now, Phil ; for her life wasn’t a happy one of late, you know, and the doctor says she must have died almost painlessly. After all, there are many worse things than death.”

I could quite understand her thinking so, poor child, and I was touched, as well I might be, by her ready sympathy with my sorrow, which was not and could not be, so heavy a one to bear as hers. Nevertheless, the loss which had fallen upon us was a deep and bitter grief to us both. It is one with which almost everybody must of necessity make acquaintance, and, like other griefs, it is certain to be cured by lapse of time ; yet there cannot be a great many people who have had a mother so patient, so indulgent and so self-sacrificing as ours had always shown herself to us, nor perhaps are there many people to whom the death of a mother means all that it meant in our case. Mr. Burgess, who looked in in the course of the day, but whom Nora declined to see, told me that we had been most mercifully dealt with and ought to feel very thankful. Possibly he was right ; yet I didn’t think at the time, and don’t think now, that I myself should use such language if I wished to be consolatory.

Mr. Burgess was anxious to ascertain my wishes with regard to the funeral, and also displayed what struck me as a rather premature curiosity as to the disposition of my poor mother's scanty fortune. I answered his questions upon the former point ; respecting the latter I was unable to give him any immediate information, and he went away, after expressing some dissatisfaction at Nora's refusal to accord him an interview. He said he hoped she was not meeting affliction in a rebellious spirit, and I replied that, to the best of my belief, she was not, but that I could not have her disturbed for the present. He did not allude to his engagement, nor did I deem it incumbent upon me to make any reference to that subject.

But of course I had to speak to Nora about it.. Not until after our mother's body had been laid in its last resting-place, beneath the shadow of the old gray church-tower, were plans for the future mooted by either of us ; but on the succeeding morning it was plain that we must no longer shirk what was almost sure to be a painful discussion. By that time we knew the provisions of the will which Uncle John, who came down from London to attend the funeral, informed us had been drawn up under his instructions and advice. A sum of £1,000 was to be held in trust for Nora, while the remainder of the personality, amounting in all to something under £9,000, was bequeathed to me. Uncle John said the arrangement was a fair and usual one ; and perhaps it was so, although it had the obvious drawback of leaving practically unprovided for, a person who was not only incapable of providing for herself, but was a great deal too proud to allow her brother to provide for her.

“I couldn’t possibly do such a thing, Phil,” was the decisive answer which she returned to a certain proposal of mine. “Setting aside any personal scruples that I might feel about robbing you, it would be downright dishonest to treat our poor, dear old mother’s will as if it didn’t exist. She knew very well what she was doing when she made it, and she was certainly right. With the little that she had to dispose of, forty or fifty pounds a year was the utmost that she could be expected to leave to a married daughter.”

“Only you are not a married daughter,” I observed.

“Well, I shall be before long; there is nothing to prevent me from fulfilling my engagement now.”

I did not think it desirable to dispute that assertion at the moment: but I pointed out that the wedding could hardly take place next week or even next month. “And what is to become of you in the meantime?” I inquired.

That was not a very easy question to answer, nor could Nora’s declaration, that she would manage somehow and that I wasn’t to bother myself, be regarded as disposing of it. However, Mr. Burgess, when he turned up soon after luncheon with a little pile of devotional works under his arm, prepared with a solution of the difficulty which he was so kind as to submit to our approval. Having heard his elephantine tread upon the gravel, and having caught a glimpse of him before he rang the door-bell, I retired hurriedly into the garden to smoke. He was entitled to claim the privilege of a private interview with his *fiancée*, and if he had anything to say to me, I presume she would let him know where to find me.

Well, I was tolerably sure that he would have something to say to me ; so that I was not surprised when, at the expiration of half an hour or thereabouts, he came pacing across the grass in order to say it. Nor, as far as that goes, was I greatly surprised at the somewhat aggrieved tone in which his remarks were delivered. He had not anticipated, (so I forced him to admit in plain terms, after a lengthy and circuitous preamble,) that my sister would be left with so meagre a dowry. He himself was not a rich man ; he had his children to consider ; and—in short, he must confess that his dear friend Mrs. Martyn's testament appeared to have been framed without due regard to the circumstances of the case.

“ I am sorry for that,” answered I briskly ; “ but of course you won’t expect me to agree with you. As for your engagement to my sister, which I tell you frankly that I don’t consider by any means a good bargain for her, you have only to say the word and it shall be off.”

He threw up his great hands and closed his eyes in shocked deprecation of my brutality. Not by him, he solemnly affirmed, should a promise, once given, ever be revoked ; I little knew him if I imagined that he was one who coveted riches or who would be willing to sacrifice the happiness of others to his own comfort. Nevertheless, he could not but feel that, if he had a sister situated as my sister was——

“ Yes, I am quite sure you would,” I interrupted, anticipating the generous course which he would adopt in such an event ; “ but you see, Mr. Burgess, I have no pretension to resemble you in any way, and I am not a bit inclined to pauperize myself in order that my sister may become the stepmother of your children. I only

want to know what your intentions are ; so that I may make our arrangements fit in with them."

He looked pained, but disclaimed any intention of jibbing—which was rather a disappointment to me. For reasons the cogency of which he said he had no doubt that I should appreciate, he could not propose an immediate celebration of his second nuptials. Advent would be upon us before Nora could decently lay aside her crape, Christmas was always a busy and anxious season, Lent would fall early next year ; upon the whole, he did not see how he could reconcile it with his duties and obligations to be married until after Easter. He added that he had talked the matter over with dear Nora, who was quite of one mind with him about it. Then he brought forward the proposition to which I alluded just now. It was that Nora should be despatched to a certain Home by the sea-side that he knew of, where she would be well cared for by the Sisters and would be provided with work, in consideration of which no charge would be made for her keep. He said he was convinced that such a period of calm seclusion and well-doing would contribute to her spiritual as well as her temporal advantage.

I thanked him very much and undertook to give his plan full consideration. I also promised (for indeed I was extremely anxious to get rid of him), that I would consider the earnest and affectionate counsels which he felt it right to urge upon me with regard to my personal inheritance. Ought I to profit by what he feared he must call an unjust display of maternal tenderness ? Ought I to consult my own ease rather than that of a helpless girl whose natural protector I was ? These were questions, which, he said, he would leave to be

decided in obedience to the dictates of my conscience, and I replied that he might safely do so.

It is, I hope, needless to say that I no more intended my sister to enter that Home than I intended her to espouse our saintly pastor; but my half-formed resolution was to some extent modified when I re-entered the house, where I found Lady Deverell seated with Nora, and was informed of an alternative project to which I felt bound to agree, although I own that I did so with some reluctance.

“It is all settled,” Lady Deverell told me in benevolent, authoritative accents; “Nora is to come to me at Fern Hill as soon as you leave and to stay with me until she marries. I shall be very pleased to have her, and I think I can answer for it that Mr. Burgess will approve of her remaining in the parish. Mr. Burgess is so good and so disinterested a man that he will be sure to be pleased with what pleases her, so long as that does not conflict with his strong sense of duty.”

What could I say? It was certainly kind of Lady Deverell to give such an invitation; Nora was evidently eager to accept it, and some little time must in all probability elapse before I could offer my sister the shelter of a roof of my own. I endeavored, therefore, to appear grateful and gracious; but I believe I have already mentioned that I am a clumsy creature, and perhaps my inability to swallow down the bread of charity without making a wry face over it was not concealed from our patroness. At all events, she did not make me look more pleasant (but possibly it was not her wish to do that), by saying she had heard upon trustworthy authority that the Duke of Hurstbourne

was leading “a profligate life” and hoping that I should ere long sever my connection with one whose example could not but be injurious to me.

I replied that the risk of contagion was comparatively slight, seeing that the greater part of his time had been spent and was likely to be spent away from Hurstbourne Castle ; after which I effected a change of subject. I could not quarrel with the woman whose helping hand I had just taken on my sister’s behalf, nor could I very well help quarrelling with her if I allowed her to calumniate my friend any farther.

I had, however, made up my mind, on other grounds than those so charitably urged by Lady Deverell, that I must resign the post which I held at Hurstbourne Castle. What my future occupation was to be I hardly knew (I am afraid I must confess that I had some thought of earning a living by my pen) ; but my first duty clearly was to secure a humble home in London and remove Nora to it. She could not refuse to keep house for me even though she would not hear of putting her fingers into my purse. Nevertheless, she would, I knew, have refused to let me give up my present employment on her account, and for that reason I refrained from telling her what I proposed to do.

A few days later we parted. We had only been yearly tenants of our cottage, for which a new occupant was found without difficulty ; the furniture was to be sold by auction, and such of our belongings as we had been unwilling to relinquish had, by Lady Deverell’s permission, been transported to the lumber-room at Fern Hill.

“ I suppose the next time I shall see you will be on my wedding day, Phil,” Nora said rather wistfully

when I took leave of her. To which I replied that there was a very fair chance of our meeting again before that auspicious date.

I did not want to have a scene—like the majority of male Anglo-Saxons, I prefer letting people divine my sentiments to expressing them—but I did feel that I was a horrid brute, as I drove towards the station and realized how completely my poor Nora must be convinced that I had abandoned her. I went straight to Hurstbourne Castle, where I had some matters of business to attend to ; thence I telegraphed to Glendwinish Lodge, which was the name of Hurstbourne's newly-acquired Highland residence, to ask whether he could put me up for a night, as I was anxious to confer with him ; and, on receiving an affirmative reply, I proceeded northwards.

On reaching my destination, I found a rather large party assembled in a house of moderate dimensions, for it appeared that there were grouse as well as red-deer upon the Glendwinish estate, and when I heard the names of some of the noblemen and gentlemen who were partaking of my patron's hospitality I perceived that the prospects of sport held out to them must have been of no mean order. The natural inference was that the price demanded for such a property must have been a heavy one ; but that, as I reflected with a sigh, was a point as to which I had no longer any right to feel anxiety. The men were tired after a long day's shooting, and most of them went to sleep even before they went to bed ; Lady Charles, who was the sole representative of her sex, disappeared immediately after dinner ; so that the evening was not far advanced when Hurstbourne, who had clad himself in a gorgeous smoking-suit, was able to

lead me into a small room on the ground-floor where, he said, we could talk without any fear of being interrupted. He handed me a cigar, pushed me into an arm-chair and began :

“ Now, I know very well what has brought you here, old chap. I’ve been outrunning the constable, and you’ve come all this way to lecture me, isn’t that it? Well, now you’re here, you’ll have to stop and help us to bring the grouse down, that’s all. Of course I’ve parted with a good lump of money; but it’s the first start that comes so expensive, don’t you see? Don’t you fret yourself; by this time next year I shall be quite a capitalist. That is, if I have any sort of luck.”

I explained that, although his method of converting himself into a capitalist did not strike me as a particularly promising one, it was not on that account that I had made so bold as to invite myself to Glendwinish. I had already informed him by letter of my mother’s death; I now thought it best to tell him quite candidly how I was circumstanced. I narrated the whole story of Nora’s engagement to Mr. Burgess and Lady Deverell’s proffered hospitality, concluding by saying that I was sure he would understand how necessary it was that I should hand in my resignation, now that it had become imperative upon me to take my sister under my wing.

“ My dear fellow,” he returned unhesitatingly, “ there isn’t the slightest necessity in the world for you to resign your functions unless you want to resign them. I quite agree with you that you will have to get your sister away from that old tabby and her pet parson; but what is to prevent her from joining you at Hurstbourne? Surely the house is large enough to hold two

of you ; and for about three quarters of the year you'll have it to yourselves. I tell you plainly, Martyn, that I shall think it deuced unfriendly of you if you leave me in the lurch like this at a moment's warning, and you will hardly be such an old humbug as to pretend that I shall lay you under any obligation by offering your sister house-room. You know as well as anybody that the amount of food which a young lady is likely to consume won't make a perceptible difference in the cost of keeping up the establishment."

That, of course, was a statement which could not be controverted ; but I pointed out to him that the extent of an obligation is not always to be measured by the standard of pounds, shillings and pence, and sincerely though I was touched by his kindness, I felt compelled to decline it. He argued with me for the best part of an hour, and I had some ado to resist appeals the force of which I could not help inwardly acknowledging. However, I did resist them, and at length he jumped up suddenly and made for the door, halting upon the threshold to say, "Stay where you are ; I'll be with you again in half a second."

He did not return quite so soon as that ; but I don't think more than twenty minutes had elapsed before he re-entered the room, dragging after him a lady who appeared to have arrayed herself somewhat hurriedly in a lace-bordered dressing-gown and whose golden locks were piled on to the top of her head after a fashion which displayed the silver undergrowth only too plainly to the amazed beholder.

"Don't look at me, Mr. Martyn !" exclaimed Lady Charles, who, like the good-natured soul that she was, was evidently almost as much tickled as vexed at be-

ing exhibited in such a plight ; "it's all Arthur's fault. He has taken it into his head that, if we can't persuade you to do as we wish to-night, you will be off the first thing in the morning, and he thinks I can persuade you, though he can't."

She came and laid her hand on my shoulder, adding, "Now, my dear, good man, you mustn't be so stupid and obstinate about it : what do you know about girls and their requirements ? At any rate, you do know what *our* requirements are, and you may take my word for it that your sister will be happier as well as more welcome under our roof than she would be with that sanctimonious old Lady Deverell. She shall be free to do exactly as you and she please ; but if you like to let me chaperon her I will, and I really am a perfectly respectable woman, though I know I don't look like one at the present moment."

She was so kind, so natural and so obviously sincere, (she did not even remember to call Hurstbourne his Grace), that I ended by yielding to her solicitations. I don't know whether I was right or wrong ; I often thought afterwards that I had been very wrong indeed ; but, hypocritical as it may sound to say so, I did honestly believe at the time that I should be doing these good people a service by remaining with them, while it is needless to add that the service which they proposed to render to Nora was, in my view, an almost incalculable one.

CHAPTER VI.

NORA SCORES A SUCCESS.

NOTWITHSTANDING Hurstbourne's kindly entreaties, I set my face south on the following day without having exterminated a single grouse. I was eager—perhaps too eager—to remove my sister from the neighborhood of Mr. Burgess, and I wanted to lose no time in imparting to her what I hoped she would regard as good news. From subsequent avowals which I had received from her I am led to believe that she did so regard it; but at the time she disappointed me a good deal by raising a cloud of difficulties; so that quite a lengthy correspondence took place between us before the last of her scruples was overcome. It is true that both she and I had to reckon with Lady Deverell, who was strongly, not to say bitterly, opposed to our scheme, and who wrote to me upon the subject in very forcible terms.

“I do not expect gratitude,” she declared, in one of her epistles; “I do not expect my personal wishes to have any weight with one whom I have done my best to befriend; but I do expect that young people who have been brought up as you and Nora have been should have some slight sense of reason and propriety. To accept hospitality from me is one thing; to accept

it from such a woman as Lady Charles Gascoigne, who, even if her position in society were what it is not and *never can be*, would still be a total stranger to you and your family, is quite another. Of the Duke of Hurstbourne I will only say that he is a very young man and, by all accounts, a very dissipated and irreligious young man. Whether it is expedient that your sister should become a member of his household I must leave it to your conscience and your common sense to decide. You and she are free agents; you can manage your affairs as may seem best to you; but upon you must fall the responsibility of having placed your sister (if you should so determine) in a thoroughly false position."

Most people, I daresay, will think that, if Lady Deverell did not express herself over and above courteously, she nevertheless had reason on her side; but I confess that to me her courtesy was more apparent than her reasonableness. It was absurd to say that Nora was about to become a member of Hurstbourne's household; it was certainly false to speak of him as dissipated and irreligious; while, as for Lady Charles, I really could not see what her social status had to do with either of us. Therefore I gave Lady Deverell to understand that her views were not mine, and hinted, with all necessary politeness and circumlocution, that I proposed to undertake the conduct of my own business. Mr. Burgess, so far as I could gather, took no active part in the discussion. Rightly or wrongly, I imagined that Mr. Burgess was a good deal less keen about his second marriage than he had been before the provisions of my mother's will had been made known to him.

However that may be, the upshot of it all was that Nora and her modest belongings were deposited at Lavenham Road Station one fine evening and that she was able to bring with her an assurance of the consent, if not precisely the approval, of her betrothed. I should have been just as well pleased had she been provided with neither the one nor the other ; but when I said something to that effect, she implored me, as a personal favor, to abstain from such remarks for the future.

"It is all settled," she declared, "and my having left Essex doesn't alter anything. Lady Deverell chooses to make out that my having come to you is a sort of preliminary to jilting Mr. Burgess ; but he doesn't think so, and of course it isn't so. No actual date has been fixed ; but I suppose, if I have another six months of spinsterhood before me, it's about as much as I have. Let us enjoy those six months together as much as we can, Phil. I'm afraid we shan't enjoy them at all unless we can agree to put other people out of sight and out of mind."

It was doubtless impossible for either of us to carry out that compact to the letter ; but it was both possible and agreeable to avoid all mention of Mr. Burgess's name, and I need scarcely say that I, for my part, had no sort of wish to mention the man. As for our enjoying ourselves together, I can answer for it that that part of the programme was faithfully executed by one of us, and I think I may add it was by the other also.

We had, in fact, everything to make us happy. We had liberty, which, I take it, is almost the chief of earthly blessings ; we had all the small luxuries belonging to wealth, which are not to be despised ; we

had horses to ride (for Hurstbourne, doubting my willingness to make myself at home, had despatched special instructions to the stud-groom upon the subject), and we had congenial society. By that I mean that we had each other's society ; but we were likewise favored by the friendly visits and invitations of the neighbors, who showed us much kindness and did not seem to think there was anything extraordinary in the circumstance of my sister's being domiciled in the Castle with me, though I have since been assured that they must have thought it very odd indeed. If so, I can only say that they disguised their sentiments with singular skill and success.

It is, I should think, most unlikely that I shall ever again be as happy and as free from care as I was that autumn, when I ought by rights to have been full of care and anxiety about the future. It was then that I composed the greater part of those poetical works to which I have made allusion above, and I was not ashamed to read them to my companion, who, on her side, affirmed without a blush that they were more spirited and stirring than any compositions of the kind that had previously come under her notice. Idiotic as it may have been of me to swallow even a grain of such flattery, I did swallow it and liked it; but I can honestly say that I did not derive half as much pleasure from that as I did from the daily evidences of returning gayety and good spirits with which Nora gladdened my heart. I remember her saying to me, as we rode homewards one evening, while the sun was sinking in the west behind a gorgeous bank of ruddy and golden clouds, that she now knew for the first time in her life what it was to be absolutely contented.

"If only we could go on like this—just you and I together, Phil—until we died, how glorious it would be?" she exclaimed. Then she sighed and added: "However, since we can't, and since it is always as well to have something reasonable to hope for, let us hope that the Duke of Hurstbourne won't take it into his head to come here and disturb us this winter."

As far as I could see, there was no likelihood of our being interfered with in the way of which she spoke. Hurstbourne had gone from Scotland to Newmarket, and in his last letter he talked of spending the winter months at Melton. Wherever he went, he took his mother with him—which would, no doubt, have been a good thing, had Lady Charles been a different sort of woman. As it was, one could only admire his filial devotion and trust that her ladyship might show herself in some degree worthy thereof. It certainly did not occur to me that the death of Colonel Home, one of the county members, would affect any alterations in Hurstbourne's plans; yet it seemed that I had underestimated my friend's interest in the contemporary politics, for one morning in December I received the following telegram from him :

"Must be home for election. Arrive to-morrow evening. Only self and mother for a few days."

The wording of the above missive was, it will be perceived, somewhat ambiguous. Did he mean that he and his mother were only coming for a few days or that other people would join them after a few days? Nora, being of a sanguine temperament, inclined to the former belief; my own impression was in favor of the

latter, inasmuch as, after all, the nomination-day had not yet been fixed, nor did we even know whether the seat was to be contested or not. It turned out that I was right. Hurstbourne had abandoned all present idea of hunting (a sacrifice made easier for him by the prevalence of north-east winds and hard frost), in order that he might bring that influence to bear upon the coming election from which, I believe, peers of the realm are supposed to abstain ; and he had invited various eloquent and celebrated personages to come down and assist him.

However, it was not until some hours after we had had the privilege of welcoming him and his mother that he alluded to the cause of their sudden descent upon us. They were both of them as kind as possible ; they took Nora's presence quite as a matter of course, making no fuss about it and treating her not so much like a guest as like one of the family. I had known beforehand that Lady Charles would be kind, only I had feared she would be rather patronizing ; but she was not in the least so, and she had not been a quarter of an hour in the house before I saw, to my great satisfaction, that she and my sister were going to be friends ; I don't think she ever thoroughly liked me—probably she was a little jealous of my power over her son—but she took a fancy to Nora from the first, and she could not have been more considerate and thoughtful and natural with the girl if she had been as well-bred as she was, unhappily, vulgar.

As for Hurstbourne, never yet have I met the man or woman with whom he was incapable of becoming intimate at a moment's notice. Long before dinner was over Nora and he were like brother and sister ; they had

discussed every horse in the stables, had differed as to the merits of the animals, had backed their respective opinions, and had agreed to bring matters to a decisive issue on the first open day. When Nora wished me good-night, she whispered to me :

“ Your Duke is as delightful as if his name were Brown, Jones, or Robinson and he had just come home from school for the holidays. I don’t want him to stay *too* long ; but I think we may manage to put up with him for a week, or even a fortnight.”

In the smoking-room I learnt that our host was likely to remain with us for at least that length of time. He was determined, he informed me, that no effort on his part should be wanting to secure the return of Mr. Somers, the Liberal-Unionist candidate.

“ And of course it’s a most unfair and disgraceful thing that a Tory should come forward to stand against him. Everybody says so. Don’t you think so yourself ? ”

I confessed to that absence of prejudice which belongs to total ignorance. “ I thought,” said I, “ it was understood that Unionists were not to be disturbed. Who is this malignant Tory, and what does he mean by breaking away from the allegiance which he owes to the wire-pullers ? ”

“ Good gracious me ! don’t you know who he is ? Why, Paul Gascoigne, of course ! I hear that his own people have begged him to retire ; but he won’t. He has the cheek to swear that the constituency is Conservative—though everybody knows that it has returned Whigs to Parliament from time immemorial—and that the late man only got in because he had pledged himself to support the Government. He pre-

tends that Somers, who has owned to holding rather Radical views upon certain questions, can't be trusted; and the worst of it is that he has immense local influence. We shall have a hard fight for it, as far as I can make out; but I believe we shall win."

He evidently enjoyed the prospect of a fight with his cousin, whatever might be the result of it, and I am afraid my sage advice that he should temper zeal with discretion was altogether thrown away upon him.

"Don't be alarmed, old man," said he, laughing; "I won't bring myself within reach of the arm of the law. But I'm not going to conceal my opinions, and I believe I'm entitled to let Somers have the use of my carriages on the polling-day. Meanwhile, if only this beastly frost will give, you and I will have a day or two with these hounds, and we'll take Miss Nora out with us. I'm awfully glad she rides: I like a girl who can ride, don't you?"

The fates ordained that Nora should be denied any opportunity of showing how deserving she was of Hurstbourne's regard in that respect; for the frost, far from giving, increased in intensity; so that on the following day it became plain that there was nothing to be done but to send post-haste to the neighboring town for a supply of skates.

The park at Hurstbourne Castle boasts of a large sheet of ornamental water, which in hard weather has always been thrown open to the skating public; so that when we betook ourselves thither, we found quite a numerous concourse of people disporting themselves upon the ice, and received a warm greeting from many of them. The young Duke, I soon saw, was going to be popular—it is not very difficult to be popular when

one is a young duke—he speedily found favor in the eyes of such members of the assemblage as he had not been previously acquainted with, and if he was not a particularly brilliant performer on skates, he was at all events a very plucky and good-humored one. Nora and I, having been born and bred in a cold country, were tolerably proficient in the art of cutting figures, and it was to Nora's tuition that he was pleased to submit himself. She managed to make him go through some remarkable evolutions; she chaffed him without mercy; he did not appear to mind being chaffed (for indeed there never lived a more unaffected or unpretending creature than he), and, seeing that they were getting on so well together, I thought I would leave them and join Lady Charles, who, enveloped in furs, was stamping up and down the bank to keep herself warm.

Lady Charles began at once to talk about Nora, of whom she spoke in language which I suppose I may be excused for calling appreciative. After all, I don't know why the fact that Nora is my sister should debar me from recognizing and proclaiming her fascinations—especially as I bear no sort of personal resemblance to her.

"She is a perfectly charming girl," Lady Charles declared—"pretty without being self-conscious, and clever without always struggling to say smart things, as most of them do. It shall be no fault of mine if she isn't provided with an excellent husband by this time next year. You really must confide her to me when we go up to London next spring. I daresay you won't care to come to town yourself; besides, you have your avo-

cations here, which his Grace tells you are discharging admirably."

I said I was very glad to hear I had so far given satisfaction, and I did not think it my duty to say anything about the Reverend George Burgess M. A.

"But isn't it rather difficult to find an excellent husband for a dowerless young woman, however pretty and clever she may be?" I inquired.

Lady Charles shook her head. "Not half so difficult as you suppose," she replied; "not half so difficult as it is to find a suitable wife for a young man of the highest station, who has every bodily and mental advantage. You see, Mr. Martyn, it is essential that the Duke of Hurstbourne should marry a girl of high rank, and it is also most desirable that he should marry an heiress. The unlucky thing is that I can't at the present moment lay my finger upon a single lady of high rank who has a fortune of her own or is even likely to inherit one, and you may imagine how anxious this makes me; for I need scarcely tell you that his Grace has been run after in the most open and bare-faced manner ever since he succeeded to the title."

I suggested that, under those distressing circumstances, it might be well to accept a compromise. Perhaps rank without wealth or wealth without rank might be put up with.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, if it comes to that, I am afraid we shall have to pocket our pride and take the money," she replied. "His Grace was most unfortunate at Newmarket—I daresay he has told you about it—and he has had other heavy losses and unavoidable expenses. Oh, yes; there is no doubt that money is more necessary for us than rank. To be

sure, we already have the one, and it seems we haven't a superfluity of the other."

Hurstbourne had not mentioned his losses at Newmarket to me; but that he had had other heavy expenses, unavoidable or otherwise, I had been made unpleasantly aware that same morning, and this foolish lady's casual revelations disquieted me not a little. He might, I presumed, count upon ridding himself of his difficulties by espousing some rich woman; but it seemed a pity that he should be driven to have recourse to such expedients.

Meanwhile, it was evident that the thought of his embarrassments did not weigh heavily upon him. He approached us after a time, grinning from ear to ear and swearing that he wasn't going to stand this kind of thing any longer.

"Just you wait a bit," said he, turning round, as he took off his skates, to shake his finger at Nora, who was executing graceful pirouettes behind him. "I owe you one for holding me up to public obloquy and ridicule, and the very first day that we get a thaw I'll remember to pay my debts. I never said I could skate; but you have committed yourself to the assertion that you can ride, and if you don't go straight, you shall hear of it, I promise you!"

"Don't lose your temper just when you are beginning to get on so well," returned Nora composedly. "If you ride as recklessly as you skate, you will be all right, because, you know, you haven't a single horse in your stables who really requires to be ridden."

They wrangled all the way home, and only made friends upon the doorstep, when Hurstbourne remarked, with a sigh, that he supposed we might as well

give up attempting to be jolly together any longer, as a lot of solemn old "cockalorums," would be arriving before dinner-time.

These Honorable and Right Honorable gentlemen appeared in due course, primed with the speeches whereby they hoped to arouse the sluggish consciences of wavering electors, and I am bound to say that their conversation was extremely tedious. I am no politician: so that I can speak with true impartiality of those politicians with whom I have been brought into contact, and if I am wrong in my impression that a theoretical Liberal is the most wearisome and unconvincing of created beings, I am willing to admit and apologize for my error: but if anybody ever persuades me to humiliate myself in that way, I am quite sure that it will not be Hurstbourne, whose gallant efforts to swallow his yawns during the harangues to which we were treated before his guests retired for the night were piteous to behold.

"It's all very fine to be a magnate of the first water," he said to me confidentially, while we were smoking a last cigar together in peace: "but there are drawbacks, you know—most confounded drawbacks! These talking beggars whom it is one's duty to listen to respectfully are one of them; but, between you and me, the people who think they would like to be duchesses are another. I'm not such a very desirable duke, as dukes go; but I can tell you that, if I hadn't my mother to protect me, I should find myself engaged to somebody or other before I knew where I was."

"Your mother," I replied, "will undoubtedly engage you to somebody before you know where you are; you

had better make up your mind to that. However, her choice is certain to be a wise one ; and after she has disposed of you, she means to take Nora in hand. She was telling me so while you were skating, and she most kindly offered to chaperon a humble nobody through the next London season."

Hurstbourne is the most hospitable of mankind ; yet he did not second his mother's invitation with the alacrity which I should have expected of him. On the contrary, he frowned and looked quite annoyed.

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good plan," said he. "Of course you are the best judge of the sort of life that you would wish your sister to lead ; but I must say that, if I had a sister, I wouldn't throw her among those London women unless I was obliged. You don't know what they are—I doubt whether any fellow can know without being a duke or a very rich man."

He proceeded to tell me what they were, supporting his assertions by sundry anecdotes which, I own, surprised me, and wound up by declaring emphatically that it would be a downright sin to launch an innocent, simple girl like my sister upon such turbid waters.

"What in the world do you think that she would gain by it ?" he inquired. "Do you imagine that she would come out of it any better or happier than she is ? Do you imagine that she would learn anything more than she already knows, except a few things which you can't wish her to know ?"

Well, I supposed that she might gain what they all hope to gain ; that is to say, a husband. But I refrained from putting the case so coarsely to this young moralist, and after all, it was a great deal more likely than

not that Lady Charles Gascoigne would forget her promise. I changed the subject by asking him how much money he had dropped over the autumn handicaps ; whereupon he promptly discovered that it was high time to go to bed.

CHAPTER VII.

FIRST BLOOD.

THE influential politicians had quite a gay time of it with us. They had, of course, to show themselves at meetings and, I suppose, to prepare their speeches in advance, and the work of canvassing was carried on briskly ; so that not much leisure was left to them for disporting themselves upon the ice. But there were dinner-parties for them every evening, and as these were attended by a certain number of young people, they were followed by dancing, to the strains of sundry musicians whose services had been secured from the neighboring town. Hurstbourne danced a great deal with Nora. Whether he exhorted her to reserve her saltatory skill for provincial festivities, instead of exhibiting it in the limited space afforded by London ball-rooms, I do not know ; but I imagine that he must have given her the benefit of some quasi-fraternal advice ; for she spontaneously informed me, one day, that she had no ambition to make the acquaintance of great ladies.

“Lady Charles,” she remarked, “couldn’t be accused by anybody of being a great lady. She is a dear old woman, and she means to be very kind, and she natu-

rally fancies that I must long for the sort of society in which she herself delights. But I shouldn't really care about it, even if I had been born a member of it, and I think you and I will spend the London season here all by ourselves, Phil. That is, unless—unless I have to leave you before it begins."

I made some discreet observation to the effect that she could not be compelled to leave me any sooner than she felt inclined. I did not want to talk about Mr. Burgess, whom I hoped to get rid of by a gentle and gradual process of retreat, and I was by no means sure that I did not want Nora to have a season in London. I am not, I believe, more worldly than another; but how could I remain blind to the advantages that might accrue to my sister from being taken up by a duke and a duke's mother? Hurstbourne, meanwhile, had converted her into so vehement a partisan that she actually found and proclaimed much to admire in Mr. Somers, a stupid little sandy-haired man, who had not even sense enough to keep his opinions to himself. He avowed that he was a Radical and appeared willing to go any lengths in the way of ordinary radicalism, though, for some reason best known to himself, he was prepared to lend his valuable support to the Irish policy of the existing administration. It seemed to me that we had got hold of about as weak a candidate as was obtainable, and I should not have been very much astonished to hear that a similar conviction was entertained by persons of greater importance than I. The Carlton, I presume, looked on at the contest with serenity, if not with absolute approval, since, in any event, the issue could not affect the Ministerial Majority.

Late one afternoon, when we were drinking five o'clock tea in the library, the rival candidate surprised us by calling. He followed his name into the room, looking bland and amiable and, I daresay, not more supercilious than he could help. He had come, he said, to show there was no ill feeling, though I cannot answer for it that those were his exact words. He shook hands with everybody and sat down and had some tea; he evidently did not think that the course which he had adopted in standing for the division against a gentleman who had the ostensible support of his own party called for any apology from him.

"In cases of this kind," he remarked composedly, while he munched a slice of bread and butter, "one can but hope that the best man will win, and by the best man one naturally means one's own man. It is a matter of very little consequence to me personally whether I take my seat in the present Parliament or not; but, situated as I am, I felt that all this bother must be accepted as one of my duties."

"I hope you don't find it a very irksome duty," said Hurstbourne rather grimly.

"Oh, not so very. It is a bore to have to shout out commonplaces from a platform, but not more of a bore for me than it is for you and your friends. I have the great advantage, you see, of knowing exactly what I mean and saying it."

This challenge was promptly taken up by one of the eminent personages present, who said that, for his part, he knew very well what he meant and that he would be interested in hearing the precise meaning of Mr. Gascoigne's apparent desire to stir up discord in the Unionist camp. However, I don't think he ob-

tained the information for which he asked, although Mr. Gascoigne was courteously and discursively explanatory. The latter wound up by declaring that the wishes of the constituency were really his wishes ; his sole object was to ascertain what these were, and if, contrary to his expectation, it should be proved to him that the division was a Radical one, he would bow to the expressed will of the majority.

“ Well, if the verdict of the majority goes against you, you will have to acknowledge yourself beaten, I suppose, whether you make a bow or not,” remarked Hurstbourne. “ Not that we are Radicals, but then you know that as well as I do.”

“ I was under the impression that Mr. Somers had sounded the Radical trumpet and thumped the Radical drum rather loudly,” said Mr. Gascoigne, with a smile. “ You, of course, are not a Radical—indeed it would be hardly in the nature of things that you should be—so, in the event of my being returned, you will have the consolation of knowing that the Legislature contains one more humble defender of your interests. Either way, I trust and believe that this political conflict will produce nothing resembling a breach between us.”

Hurstbourne, it may be assumed, shared neither that trust nor that belief ; for he only responded by a dubious sort of grunt, and the rest of us grunted in sympathy. It is almost impossible to convey by a mere report of his words any idea of how exasperating and offensive Paul Gascoigne was. I daresay that what provoked us beyond all endurance was that, although he had sinned flagrantly against the laws of both political and social courtesy, he had the air of being quite

willing to forgive us which belongs to conscious superiority. Or, if it was not that, it may have been that he obviously counted upon defeating us at the poll. I am glad to be able to add that not one of us openly lost his or her temper. It was only after he had taken his leave that we exploded ; and I must say that never in my life have I heard a man abused with more hearty unanimity. Lady Charles, who, when roused, has a fine flow of language at command, expressed, I believe, the general opinion when she asserted that that nephew of hers was a despicable, sneaking, malicious hypocrite.

“ He ought to have been a woman ! ” she cried, nobly surrendering the defence of her sex for the time being. “ *No man* would stoop to the miserable little devices that he adopts to gratify his feeling of jealousy and revenge. As if everybody couldn’t see that he came here to-day in the hope of making us put ourselves in the wrong by quarrelling with him !—and as if everybody didn’t know that, if he had been the Duke of Hurstbourne, he would have backed up Mr. Somers ! He never *will* be the Duke of Hurstbourne, though ; I can promise him that much ! ”

The holder of the title to which Mr. Paul Gascoigne was heir-presumptive laughed a little at this promise, which in truth sounded a somewhat bold one ; but he answered : “ All right, mother ; I’ll take care of myself, if only for his sake, and if it ever should please Heaven to let me have a chance of fighting him without the gloves, I’ll do my best to give him a licking that he won’t forget in a hurry. For the present, I suppose we shall have to content ourselves with licking him out of the field on the polling-day.”

It really did seem as if we ought to be able to accomplish that triumph, considering how universally unpopular our opponent was ; yet, as the decisive moment drew near, it became increasingly evident that the struggle was going to be a close one. Promises of support we did receive in large numbers ; but those who were most competent to gauge the true sentiments of the voters expressed a good deal of doubt as to whether all those promises would be fulfilled. Mr. Gascoigne, besides being a very powerful man by reason of his wealth and his position in the county, was a fairly fluent speaker ; he appeared to have convinced many of the electors that his views were those held by the late Duke ; not a few of them were persuaded that such a candidate as Mr. Somers would not, in the late Duke's time, have had the countenance of the Castle ; and as the fight was not, strictly speaking, a party one, there was, we were told, a probability of numerous abstentions.

Towards the end of the time our exertions grew indefatigable, and Hurstbourne, who was in high spirits and sanguine of success, vowed that, whatever happened, a vote of thanks would be due to Nora.

“ Your sister has gone about winning hearts and votes for us like a regular trump, Martyn,” said he. “ She is worth a dozen of a lazy old philosopher like you—at least, at an election time.”

She is, I am sure, worth more than a dozen of me at any time, and she certainly threw herself into this fray with a vigor beyond the capacity of so lukewarm a politician as myself. All the same, I don’t think that the political question can have had much to do with her enthusiasm ; for she confessed to me, when nobody

was listening, that in her conversation with electors and electors' wives she had been obliged to avoid all discussion of the respective programmes of Conservatives, Liberal Unionists, Gladstonians and Home Rulers.

"What is the use," she pertinently inquired, "of squabbling over matters which neither they nor I understand? This is simply a fight between the Duke and Mr. Gascoigne, and if they prefer Mr. Gascoigne to the Duke, all I can say is that they are too stupid to deserve the franchise at all."

It is to be hoped that a more statesmanlike view of the situation was taken by Hurstbourne's eminent guests; although, from certain remarks which they allowed to fall, I gathered that Mr. Somers, with his indiscreet utterances as to the established Church, the hereditary branch of the Legislature and the principle of one man one vote, did not command their entire sympathy. Before the election day they all left us. They had done everything that they could do, they had talked themselves hoarse, their presence could render no further service to the cause, and some of them had engagements elsewhere, while others proposed to seek a little well-earned rest in their own homes. So they departed, after assuring their entertainer of their hearty good wishes and receiving in return the thanks which were their due.

As soon as the last of them had driven away Hurstbourne, with a beaming countenance, came skipping into the room which had been appropriated by Lady Charles as her boudoir.

"Hooray!" he shouted; "now let's all of us stand on our heads!"

He suited the action to the word and made me do

the same, notwithstanding my protestations. I hope it is not necessary for me to add that our example was not followed by the two remaining members of the quartette ; but I daresay three of us were really very thankful for our deliverance. Lady Charles, I believe, liked company and derived enjoyment from rubbing shoulders with distinguished persons.

But if we were inclined to be a trifle uproarious, now that we were once more left to ourselves and could speak before we thought, instead of thinking before we spoke, a very effectual damper was in store for our too exuberant spirits. We all stayed at home on the polling-day : we had been advised to do so, and we recognized the wisdom of the advice ; for, after all, it does not become a duke, and his immediate circle to descend from the serene heights on which they dwell into the turmoil of a contested election. But of course arrangements had been made for acquainting us with the result at the earliest possible moment, and very sad were the tidings conveyed to us by a mounted messenger. Anybody can account for a victory—it is to be accounted for by the straightforward and satisfactory assumption that the majority of the electors are intelligent men—but when one is called upon to explain away a defeat, a rather larger supply of ingenuity has to be brought into play. For the next few days I made a careful study of the London newspapers, and I gathered, after perusing many leading-articles, that the return of Mr. Gascoigne by a majority of over 800 was chiefly due to the ill-advised interference of the young Duke of Hurstbourne. No constituency—so these learned scribes appeared to have discovered—likes being dictated to ; no honest Englishman is apt to be predisposed in favor of a Radical

who pledges himself to support a Tory administration ; a contest of the kind which had just been witnessed, ought never to have taken place at all, and if the juvenile nobleman who had exerted himself so ostentatiously in promoting the candidature of Mr. Somers had been a little older and a little more experienced, he would have thrown the weight of his influence, such as it was, into the scale on his cousin's behalf. That is the sort of gratitude that one obtains from one's friends when one has been beaten.

I don't think Hurstbourne was greatly disheartened or distressed by the comments of the press ; but he did not affect to deny that Paul Gascoigne's triumph was a heavy blow to him.

"That beggar has got first blood," said he ; "there's no disputing that. He's very much mistaken if he thinks I shall throw up the sponge, though. We'll do better at the next election, and in the meantime he won't trample me underfoot without a fight for it, I can tell him."

"Never," declared Lady Charles, who was highly incensed, "will we receive that man or speak to him again ! He deserves to be cut by the head of the family, and cut he shall be."

Nora, though not less angry, was a good deal less silly. "You mustn't let him think that you feel in the least sore," said she : "the best plan would be to ask him to dinner and congratulate him and pat him on the back. He has secured a seat in Parliament—much good may it do him ! Who, except a few really clever people, cares to spend the best part of the year listening to dreary debates in a stuffy chamber, filled with vulgar nobodies ? Parliament isn't everything, and

out of parliament I should think Mr. Gascoigne was about the easiest man in England to put to confusion. He poisons foxes, he doesn't play cricket, he isn't much of a shot, and I haven't yet met a single individual who pretends to like him personally. Just let him try to trample upon his betters, that's all ! ”

Hurstbourne considered this a very spirited speech on Nora's part. He told me so afterwards, adding that he believed my sister was as shrewd a woman as his mother—which he meant for a high compliment. He did not detect any shrewdness at all in my recommendation that he should leave his cousin alone ; he was unable to see the slightest point in my allusion to brazen and earthenware vessels ; he said he was a peaceable creature, but that if people chose to tread upon his toes, they must take the consequences. He was, in a word, so evidently bent upon having his revenge by hook or by crook that it was useless to reason with him. Were this world inhabited only by the male variety of the species, we should doubtless be spared an infinity of worry, not to mention occasional catastrophes ; but we have been created male and female, and, like the unwary persons who tread upon Hurstbourne's toes, I suppose we must accept the consequences of our embarrassing position.

CHAPTER VIII.

BREAKERS AHEAD.

ON looking back at the concluding paragraph of the previous chapter, I see that I have permitted myself therein to speak of the female sex in terms which may seem to imply that I am not alive to the nature of woman's beneficent mission upon the surface of this planet. But I really did not mean to be rude when I wrote the words, and should any lady do me the honor to peruse the present narrative (as it seems not improbable that a few will), I would venture to appeal to that lady's kindness and sympathy not to be too hard upon me. She will, I know, admit that women, and especially young women, require to be managed by women; with her quick intelligence she will at once guess why the memory of bygone irritation and perplexity caused me to express myself irritably; of course, too, she will have seen ere this something which I solemnly declare that I never dreamt of until circumstances forced a most distressing conjecture upon me. And if I may now be permitted—like a parson in those churches where the men sit on one side of the aisle and the women on the other—to turn to the male section of my readers, I hope that they also will feel

for me, though perhaps it would be unreasonable to expect that they should acquit me of stupidity. There is, no doubt, always a possibility, almost a probability, that when a young man and a young woman are thrown together from morning to night in a country house, they will end by falling in love with one another. I quite allow that; only I do think it was excessively improbable that the Duke of Hurstbourne should fall in love with my sister, or she with him. It was so absolutely out of the question that anything could come of it if they did, and so natural to assume that they must both be thoroughly aware of that! Moreover, Nora was already betrothed to Mr. Burgess, and Hurstbourne knew it.

Nevertheless, I ought to have had my wits about me, and I suppose, if I had been a woman, I should have had them about me; although I may plead, as some extenuation of my blindness, that Lady Charles Gascoigne's wits appeared to have gone wool-gathering. Lady Charles, I imagine, saw no more danger in her son's intimate companionship with Nora than she would have seen in his making a friend of his grandmother or of an infant: the one thing which impressed her most powerfully about him was that he was a duke: dukes, it is generally conceded, cannot contract matrimonial alliances with a class far beneath their own, and even if he did indulge in an occasional flirtation with some impossible person, he would be none the worse off for that. I am not sure that—supposing these to have been her sentiments—she would have been wrong: only it is obvious that my point of view was not, and could not be, identical with hers.

So, if the reader pleases, I will write myself down an

ass. I suspected nothing: it did not occur to me to attribute Hurstbourne's determination to stay on for a while at the Castle to any other cause than the continuance of the hard weather, which, as he truly said, prevented its being worth any man's while to undertake a journey to Leicestershire: I did not even smell a rat when a thaw came and when he telegraphed for three of his hunters to be despatched from Melton. The fact is that I was very busy and not a little bothered with accounts: I could not often accompany these young people when they begged me to ride or skate with them: and, as they seemed to get on quite comfortably without me, I devoted my attention to my work and did not always remember to inquire how they had been spending their many hours of leisure. Lady Charles slept a good deal. She was one of those lazy, good-humored persons who are usually contented so long as those about them are contented, and although an uneventful mode of existence may not have been greatly to her taste, she did not complain of it. Most likely she thought that it would not last long and that she would soon be removed into circles where the fascinations of hair-dye and pearl-powder are properly appreciated.

I believe the first thing that gave me a vague sensation of uneasiness—and even then it was but a vague sensation—was Hurstbourne's saying abruptly to me, one evening, that I really ought to insist upon my sister's engagement being broken off.

“It's utterly monstrous, you know,” said he. “It can't be allowed to go on; and the sooner that old bloke is told so the better, in my opinion.”

I replied that it scarcely came within the range of my

privileges to convey the suggested information to the old bloke, but that, as I had already mentioned, I was not without hope of that information being imparted to him sooner or later by one more directly interested in the matter than I was.

“Oh, it’s all very fine to throw the whole responsibility upon your sister,” returned Hurstbourne rather angrily ; “but you know as well as I do that she hates the man, and that she would give him the sack to-morrow if she wasn’t afraid of becoming a burden upon you.”

“Upon my honor, I don’t know that,” I answered.
“How do you know it, pray ?”

He said he had heard it from her own lips, which, I confess, startled me, for, considering that Nora had not for a long time past so much as mentioned Mr. Burgess’s name to me, it did seem strange that she should have made a confidant of a mere acquaintance. However, he dispelled my nascent apprehensions by dwelling upon her unselfishness and by a repetition of his statement that she was afraid of burdening me with the expense of her maintenance. “Which is utter nonsense,” he added : “because as long as you remain here, she won’t cost you a penny. You needn’t tell me, my dear old chap, that you wouldn’t grudge her every penny you possess ; that’s a matter of course. Only you must see that she can’t very well take the first step : it’s for you to do that.”

Was it for me to kick the reverend gentleman into space ? I was unable to think so, much as I should have enjoyed the task, and I assured my friend that I could not, without due authorization, assume such a responsibility. “I told you long ago,” said I, “that I

abhorred this engagement ; but I am not entitled to forbid it, and unless Nora breaks it off of her own accord, as I hope she will, I can do nothing."

" Oh, bosh ! " he returned impatiently ; " there's no doubt about her wishing to break it off. All you have to do is to show a little sympathy and—and encouragement, don't you know."

I did not take his advice. I said to myself that Nora would certainly come to me as soon as she had made up her mind, and perhaps I was not altogether pleased with Hurstbourne's intervention, although, as I said before, his words only caused me a temporary uneasiness. During the next few days I confidently expected my sister to apply to me for counsel and consolation, and she disappointed me by doing nothing of the sort. Indeed, I scarcely saw her : for when she was not out riding with Hurstbourne she was playing billiards or otherwise amusing herself with him. There was nothing that I could detect at all resembling a flirtation between them : they were more like a couple of children than two grown-up people. At luncheon and at dinner they engaged in a perpetual squabble, to which Lady Charles and I listened with benevolent amusement : she criticised his horsemanship, while he did his best to get a rise out of her by pretending to doubt her knowledge of the subject under discussion : sometimes he was successful and chuckled gleefully over his success, sometimes she managed to provoke him into vainglorious boastings : it all sounded quite silly and harmless.

So I went back to my figures, which, with all the pains that I bestowed upon them, could not be made to work out to my satisfaction, and reflected, foolishly

enough, that sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. The chief evil of those days, from Hurstbourne's point of view, was that they were non-hunting days. It was not, to be sure, actually freezing ; but the frost had gone deep into the ground, meets were not yet advertised, and there were many signs that the partial thaw which had set in was not going to last long. One night the wind veered to the east of north, the next morning we woke to find our windows coated with ice ; and then there was nothing left for a poor fox-hunter to do but to curse the climate of his native land and inquire disconsolately what had become of his skates.

“His Grace,” said Lady Charles to me, with her comical little air of condescension, “is wonderfully good at accommodating himself to circumstances. You may imagine how tedious it must be to him to go on living in this humdrum way, removed from all his friends and all his amusements ; but he never grumbles, as other men would ; and whatever his feelings may be, he contrives to hide them.”

In common justice to him, it must be admitted that he hid them very well indeed. Any uninformed person would have supposed that he was enjoying himself immensely, notwithstanding the severe shakings which he received from his daily falls upon the ice, and when his mother disinterestedly proposed that they should run up to London for a week and see the new plays, he looked quite dismayed.

“London in an east wind !” he exclaimed, in a tone of pained remonstrance : “oh, I don't think that would be good enough—I don't really ! Why, there would be such dense fogs that we shouldn't be able to stir out of doors all day long ; and as for the plays, they're

utter rot. You can see that for yourself in the papers. Of course if you *want* to go, mother, we'll go; but I don't believe you would like it when you were there, and goodness knows how long it will be before I get another opportunity of proving to Miss Martyn that, with a little practice, I can do all the figures that she is forever bragging about."

"I wasn't thinking of myself," answered good-natured Lady Charles: "I was only afraid that you must be getting bored to death here. If you aren't, so much the better."

"Oh, I'm all right," Hurstbourne declared, with a prompt brightening of face and tone. "I shouldn't like our friend Paul to think that he had driven me out of the county like a beaten cur; besides, I'd really rather be here than anywhere else. Skating isn't hunting, but it does well enough to fill up the time when there's no other sport to be had, and it's better than totting up sums in addition all day long, anyhow. Now, look here, Martyn, you must come down to the lake with us this afternoon, and get a little healthy exercise. I believe half the time when you pretend to be so busy you're only writing sonnets, or something of that sort."

A modest blush suffused my cheeks, for I do feel that, however communicative Nora might have seen fit to be respecting her own affairs, she ought to have respected her brother's secrets; but she looked as if she did not know what Hurstbourne meant, and I thought I wouldn't pursue the topic. I said I would run down to the ice in the course of the afternoon if I could manage it, but that, without any humbug, I had an awful lot of work on hand.

My excuse was accepted; perhaps, after all, my com-

pany was not so very ardently desired, and soon afterwards I was free to grapple once more with those daily labors, in the discharge of which I received no assistance from the only person who could have rendered them lighter or more hopeful for me. To cut your coat according to your cloth is an excellent plan : but what size or shape of coat can be cut when you are ignorant of the quantity of cloth at your disposal ? What bothered me was, that although I had pretty well ascertained the amount of my employer's income, actual and prospective, I had no means of discovering more than a certain proportion of his expenditure. He had already slightly overdrawn his banking account ; I did not like to ask him whether I was correct in my suspicion that he had borrowed money from less trustworthy and more expensive gentlemen than the family bankers. Nevertheless, I resolved, that same afternoon, that I would risk his displeasure by putting the above inquisitorial question to him. Unless I did so, and unless he answered me candidly, my services would be scarcely worth the price that he was paying for them ; so that, when I closed my books and took my skates in my hand, I saw quite clearly the path marked out for me by the finger of duty—which is always a comforting mental position to have reached.

I was crossing the park at a slinging trot, planning as I went, how I could lead Hurstbourne aside and stretch him on the rack without further delay, when I met my proposed victim, who was running as hard as he could in the opposite direction, and who, on catching sight of me, pulled up. He was breathless, and much agitated.

“Your sister has had an accident, Martyn,” said he,

L. of C.

hurriedly ; “ you’ll find her in the boat-house. I hope it isn’t serious, but I don’t know, and I’m going back to the Castle to send for the doctor. Some infernal tinker ran full tilt against her, and knocked her over. She was sensible when I left her, so there’s no concussion of the brain, I trust, only I’m afraid there must be a broken bone, because she seemed to be suffering so much. Go to her, and have her carried up to the house if you think she can stand it—I mustn’t stop. That fool of a doctor was there skating yesterday when nobody wanted him—why the deuce couldn’t he be there to-day ! Just like him ! Well, I must run on.”

He was out of sight before I had time to ask for further particulars, but, indeed, it was plain that I should obtain speedier information from the evidence of my own senses than I was likely to get out of him. It did not take me long to reach the boat-house, where I found Nora lying upon a pile of cloaks and overcoats, and surrounded by a dismayed and sympathetic throng. She was pale, and seemed to be in a good deal of pain, but I perceived at once, to my great relief, that her brain was uninjured, and, as soon as she saw me, she tried, without very much success, to summon up a laugh.

“ Don’t look so horrified, Phil,” said she ; “ I’m not killed this time. I had all the breath knocked out of me, and I have bumped the back of my head, and I rather think I have broken my arm, but I’m quite capable of walking home, if they would let me.”

It appeared to me that she might, at any rate, be carried home out of the cold, and I was making preparations for doing this when, by good luck, the doctor, who had come, as usual, to seek a little recreation after his daily rounds, arrived upon the scene.

"What's all this?" asked the burly little redheaded man. "Been coming to grief, Miss Martyn? Not through any want of skill on your own part then, I'm quite sure."

A tall, melancholy-looking youth, upon whom the eyes of the rest of the assemblage were fixed in severe condemnation, confessed, almost tearfully, that he had been the unintentional cause of the disaster. He protested with pathetic earnestness that he wished he had broken both his legs before he had been so clumsy, but his repentance met with scant acknowledgment from the doctor, who interrupted him by remarking curtly that if he hadn't anything more sensible to say than that, he had better take himself off. The other bystanders were not much more civilly dealt with. They were requested to go outside and stay there until their assistance was asked for; after which there was a brief examination of the patient, followed by a satisfactory verdict.

"No great damage done," said the doctor, who was kneeling beside my sister, and who glanced round to nod reassuringly at me: "only a shaking and a few contusions and a dislocated shoulder, which I'll put right in a minute. Now, Miss Martyn, I'm not going to hurt you very much, but whether I hurt you or not, you'll have to bear it. Just give me your hand, will you?"

He kicked off his boot, placed his foot under her arm-pit and, with one vigorous tug, the operation was accomplished. "There," said he. "Now we must take you home and put you to bed: you have had more of a shock than you think for, but you'll find it out tomorrow, and you'll be pretty stiff for a day or two, I

can tell you. Lucky it was no worse ! That young gabby was trying to skate backwards, I suppose. Well, he won't attempt to do such a thing again, unless he has the whole lake to himself, you may be sure. It isn't likely that he will be allowed to forget to-day's performance."

As a matter of fact, I believe that the poor young man never has been allowed to forget it. In quiet rural neighborhoods the memory of all performances, whether good or bad, is apt to die hard, and public indignation had been powerfully aroused by this mishap to a lady who, as I think I have mentioned before, had known how to make herself popular. However, we did all we could to convince him that we bore no malice : Nora insisted upon sending for him before we took her home, in order that he might see for himself how little she had suffered from an unavoidable collision : even Hurstbourne, whom we encountered on our way back, and who expressed extreme joy on finding that his apprehensions had been exaggerated, went so far as to promise that he would not break the stupid idiot's head.

I should not be telling the truth, were I to deny that I myself felt a strong inclination, in the course of the same evening, to break the head of another stupid idiot, and that that head was placed above the shoulders of the Duke of Hurstbourne. Of course his conduct had been due to mere stupidity and idiocy ; of course he had no serious intentions ; of course he would have been horrified at the idea of breaking a rustic maiden's heart for his amusement ; and of course two-thirds of the cruelty that is committed in this world is unintentional cruelty. That is just the provoking part of it.

Nora was put to bed as soon as she reached the Castle, and Lady Charles fussed round her in the kindest possible way, and everything was done to make her comfortable. She was going to be all right in a day or two, only in the meantime her nervous system had been upset, and I suppose that was why she informed me abruptly, while I was sitting beside her and endeavoring to interest her in the latest intelligence conveyed to us by the evening papers, that she had determined to throw over Mr. Burgess. Immediately after making this announcement she burst into tears, which disturbed and alarmed me, because crying is not, as a general rule, one of her weaknesses. I could only say (for I was reluctant to agitate her more than I could help) that I was very glad to hear it and that I saw no reason for her distressing herself about a thoroughly sensible resolution ! but, as she did not stop weeping, I inquired presently whether she had any cause for unhappiness beyond that which she had mentioned.

“ None whatever,” she answered. “ It makes me feel rather like a brute, and it leaves me as a dead weight upon your hands, that’s all. Still I can’t help it ! I don’t love him, and I can’t possibly marry him ! You yourself told me once, Phil, that it was shameful to marry a man whom one doesn’t love.”

I assured her that I had no inclination at all to recede from an opinion which I have always held, and which I continue to hold to the present day. “ But,” I ventured to add, “ it isn’t, I suppose, out of deference to my views that you have so suddenly changed your own. Hurstbourne told me, the other day, that you had been speaking to him about your engagement,

and no doubt he has dissuaded you from keeping it. That is all very well, only, Hurstbourne, you know, good fellow though he is, is not precisely one whose advice it would always be safe to follow blindly."

At this Nora began to laugh. "Oh," said she, "the Duke is a goose and you are wise; nobody knows that better than he does. All the same, it does occasionally come to pass that wisdom proceeds out of the mouth of fools."

"Is it his wisdom or his folly that leads you to discuss subjects with him upon which you decline to enter with your brother?" I asked sternly.

I looked at her, hoping against hope that she would not blush, but she did blush; so I picked up the evening paper again, with a heavy heart, and read out scraps of fashionable intelligence which were probably as unmeaning to her as they were to me. She had virtually told me all that there was to tell; I could not expect, or even wish, that she should be more explicit.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS ST. GEORGE.

NORA was soon herself again. She had been mentally as well as physically upset, and she had said things which she may possibly have regretted when her nervous system recovered its customary equilibrium ; but she had quite made up her mind to renounce the care of Mr. Burgess and his children. In assuring me of her unaltered resolution she, nevertheless, took occasion to beg that I would say nothing about it for the present.

“ There is no hurry,” said she. “ Mr. Burgess, as you know, isn’t in a hurry, and of course my private affairs don’t concern anybody here except you and me.”

“ Most certainly they don’t,” I replied, with an emphasis of the futility of which I was fully aware. “ It can’t signify a straw to Lady Charles Gascoigne whether you marry this or that person, or whether you remain a spinster ; as for Hurstbourne, he is a simple, kind-hearted fellow, and I can well understand that he may have been shocked at the idea of your engaging yourself to a man of Mr. Burgess’s age ; but I am afraid he will forget your existence and mine as soon as we are out of his sight, and his own affairs, you may

be sure, interest him a hundred times more than yours —which, after all, is only natural."

" You do the duke an injustice," said Nora ; " he doesn't forget you when you are out of his sight. He looks upon you as his best friend, and I don't think he is very far wrong."

Then she laughed and inquired whether, by any chance, I imagined that she had lost her heart to this appreciative scion of the British aristocracy.

I avoided giving a direct answer. I was under no illusion upon the subject ; but I had sense enough to see that the mischief had passed beyond the range of verbal correctives. What course it behoved me to take, and what course our mother would have taken, had she been situated as I was, I could not tell, but it seemed to me best to promise that I would keep Nora's secret and to adopt every possible precaution for preventing further private intercourse between her and Hurstbourne. I can't say for certain, but I rather suspect that, during the ensuing ten days, they both of them found me a persistent and intolerable nuisance. They behaved very well about it. They professed, and even appeared, to be delighted with the companionship which I so ruthlessly thrust upon them ; they never inquired how it was that I had such a superfluity of leisure upon my hands all of a sudden ; there was not, properly speaking, the smallest flirtation between them when I joined in their games of billiards, or when—a genuine thaw having at last set in—I attended them in the hunting-field. Yet, watching them narrowly, I perceived by a thousand little signs that my fears rested upon only too solid a foundation, and that the worst that could happen had happened. The worst, I

mean, as regarded the existence of a calamity which I was powerless to avert or minimize; of course a much worse time was in store for poor Nora; for whereas she was now ridiculously happy, it was beyond doubt that she would ere long be quite as ridiculously, but not less thoroughly, miserable. And all this because a well-meaning young man with a rather handsome face hadn't vanity enough to preserve him from making havoc of the future of a girl to whom he had taken a passing fancy! I feel confident that everyone who reads these lines will excuse me for having snapped viciously at him every now and then, without ostensible cause for so doing, and will agree that he ought not, in all conscience, to have looked so surprised and hurt when he was snapped at.

Well, I daresay he became less dense later on, but whether he did, or whether he didn't, the inevitable had to occur. One morning there was a lawn meet at the house of a neighboring squire, which was patronized by all the great people of the county, together with their wives, their families, their horses, and their carriages. Amongst the latter I speedily recognized the equipage which had been sent to the station to meet Mr. Paul Gascoigne on the day when he had so thoughtfully put our noses out of joint by ordering postillions; if I did not at once recognize one of the ladies who sat in it, facing its owner, that was because she was about the last person in the world whom I should have expected to encounter in such a place, or on such an occasion.

But Nora, who was close beside me, touched my elbow with her hunting-crop, exclaiming, not without a perceptible inflection of alarm in her voice, "Good gracious, Phil, there's Lady Deverell!" And, sure

enough, the forefinger and the hook nose of the venerable lady began presently to convey to us signals which it was impossible to disregard.

Her ladyship—so we were informed after we had approached and had exchanged greetings with her, and with the newly-elected M.P.—was staying for a short time at Lavenham. She was accompanied by her niece, Miss St. George, to whom she was graciously pleased to introduce us, and who, I thought, took somewhat unnecessary pains to show us what very small fry we were in her estimation. Miss St. George was a very tall young lady. Her large, dark eyes only rested upon me superciliously for a single moment ; yet such is my calm impartiality that I was ready to acknowledge at the time, as I am ready to acknowledge now, the fact of her being singularly beautiful. I don't say that I admired her, that is quite another thing. There is no law that I know of which compels free-born Britons to admire beauty when they see it, and if my taste is bad, it is nevertheless my taste, and will remain such.

For about five minutes I listened with one ear to the fluent political commonplaces and the ill-disguised political exultation of Mr. Paul Gascoigne, while with the other I caught fragments of the kindly lecture which Lady Deverell was addressing to my sister. " You really must not ask me to approve of it, my dear," I heard her saying ; " hunting cannot be considered a suitable amusement for the future wife of a parish priest. As for sport in the abstract, there is much to be said in favor of its being supported by those whose means and position entitle them to engage in it. Mr. Gascoigne, as I daresay you know, is a sportsman himself and an excellent shot, but he has far too deep a

sense of his responsibilities to give up his life to sport, as his cousin does. Though, to be sure, I understand that when the present Duke of Hurstbourne is not engaged in sport, he is usually even worse employed."

At that moment the present Duke of Hurstbourne rode up and joined us, thereby, perhaps, preserving a friend of his from speaking unadvisedly with her lips. He greeted his cousin pleasantly—Hurstbourne can't help being pleasant, except when he means to be downright rude—he was introduced to Lady Deverell, who bowed in a very distant and stately fashion, and I noticed that Miss St. George's languid eyes brightened a little as she acknowledged his salutation. How queer it is that the stupidest and most unobservant people sometimes discover, by a sort of inspiration, things which have not even happened yet, but which are certainly going to happen. I know it is so, because I can speak from personal experience; but I cannot account for the fact, nor have I the slightest idea why I was persuaded, before Miss St. George had exchanged a dozen words with Hurstbourne, that she intended to set her cap at him. I overheard all, or nearly all, that they said to one another; nothing could have been more innocent or more dull. It was a good job, he remarked, that that beastly frost had gone at last; she assented, and, in reply to a question of his, confessed that she was fond of riding. She added that she did sometimes hunt, but that she had not put on her riding-habit that day, because it had not been suggested to her that she should do so, and because she had been given to understand that Mr. Gascoigne was not a hunting man.

"More's the pity," observed Hurstbourne; where-

upon she shrugged her shoulders, and held her peace.

I think there was a pause after that; or if any further observations were exchanged between them, they were drowned by the deep voice of Lady Deverell, who had resumed her interrupted homily to my sister. The next words from Hurstbourne's lips which caught my ear were of a kind which reflected credit upon him, and gave evidence of conciliatory and neighborly inclinations on his part. He was calling his cousin "old chap," and was inviting the whole party to come over and lunch some day. There wouldn't be anything for them to do, he said, but perhaps they might like to see the place, and if Lady Deverell or Miss St. George cared at all about flowers, he could show them a pretty fair display, considering the time of year. "No swagger orchids, such as I suppose you have at Lavenham; still a decent amount of ordinary stove and greenhouse plants, you know."

The invitation was accepted. Mr. Gascoigne's manner implied that he was always happy to confer a favor upon a poor relation; Lady Deverell's was that of an austere saint, who knows that for her there can be no rest in visiting the haunts of profligacy, while Miss St. George was almost effusive in her gratitude.

"Oh, thank you so much!" she exclaimed. "I have always longed to see Hurstbourne Castle, which everybody says is one of the finest places in England: but I didn't like to ask Mr. Gascoigne to take us there as sight-seers while you were at home."

On our way towards the covert-side Hurstbourne caught me up and said, "That's an awfully good-looking girl."

"Yes," I replied ; "she is very good-looking indeed. I doubt whether she is anything more."

"Oh, you be hanged !" returned Hurstbourne, laughing. "You're an old St. what's-his-name—Anthony, wasn't it ? Pretty faces don't appeal to you, you must needs have mental beauty ; whereas everybody else, including our esteemed friend Paul, knows that if a woman isn't physically attractive, she has missed her vocation. I don't suppose you noticed anything ; but I'll lay you two to one in whatever you like that Paul has lost his heart to that Miss St. George."

I did not take his offer, because, for one thing, I can't afford to bet, and for another, he was mistaken in his assumption that I had noticed nothing. On the contrary, I had noticed that Mr. Gascoigne had not half liked his guest's gracious reception of the young duke, and that he had made several vain attempts to break in upon their brief and harmless colloquy. However, I did not care to mention this ; I only said : "Well, if he has lost his heart to her, by all means let him marry her. I shall not forbid the banns, nor, I presume, will you ; and if appearances are to be relied upon, they ought to make a remarkably well-suited couple."

Hurstbourne gave a sort of snort and left me. I knew just what the state of his mind was : I knew perfectly well that he would like to forbid the banns if he could ; I knew that he had been a little bit fascinated and that he had a very strong desire to cut his cousin out in any way that might seem to lie open to him. I couldn't help it, though, I could only hold my tongue, and wish that I hadn't been such an ass as to bring my poor dear Nora to Hurstbourne Castle, and wonder what Providence could be about to let things fall out so askew,

without the faintest apparent prospect of advantage to the persons concerned. My mother used to be fond of affirming that the designs of Providence are beyond our comprehension. Everything leads me to believe that she was right.

We had a blank day, which was possibly the reason why we all three returned home out of spirits and out of temper. Other causes may have been at work ; but I can't say for certain, because of course I don't know what passed between Hurstbourne and Nora after I lost sight of them. The latter, when I rejoined her on the homeward path, had some harsh things to say about Lady Deverell, the justice of which I felt to be indisputable, and consequently did not attempt to dispute ; but she cordially—almost too cordially—concurred in Hurstbourne's outspoken admiration of Miss St. George, and I daresay he was more surprised than I was by the uncalled-for way in which she snubbed him when he said cheerfully :

“ Well, Miss Nora, we've wasted our time and our patience to-day, haven't we ? But never mind ! We'll have better luck next Saturday. Of course you'll come out on Saturday.”

“ I think not,” she replied : “ it's hardly good enough. If one has a chance of being shown any sport, one can submit to sermons from Lady Deverell and to hours of improving conversation with—with other people ; but this doesn't seem to be a very sporting county.”

I don't think anybody would accuse Hurstbourne of being a bad-tempered man ; but he is certainly rather short in the temper, and he is young ! So instead of asking Nora point-blank what was the matter with her (which would have driven her into a corner), he raised

his chin an inch and a half and looked huffy. Altogether, it was scarcely one of those days which deserve to be marked with a white stone.

What sort of a stone ought to have marked the day on which Mr. Gascoigne, accompanied by his fair visitors, came to partake of luncheon with us I can't pretend to decide. Such questions depend, of course, upon the point of view of the individual who holds the stone: and if, on that occasion, I had held a stone in my hand and had possessed perfect freedom of action, I really don't know whether I should have hurled the missile at Paul Gascoigne's head or at Lady Deverell's or at Miss St. George's. They were all of them, in their several ways, so extremely disagreeable. However, I take it that Hurstbourne did not find Miss St. George disagreeable, whatever may have been his opinion with regard to the two others.

It was with the two others that Nora and I and poor Lady Charles had to deal. I don't mind admitting now that they got the better of us; because there are, after all, certain contests in which it is more honorable to be vanquished than to conquer, and although it may be that we should have said as many nasty things as they did if we had been clever enough and rude enough, I am sure we consulted our own dignity by remaining strictly on the defensive. Lady Deverell, who was an honest woman, insulted us all pretty openly. She appeared to have a violent prejudice against Hurstbourne; she despised Lady Charles; she was displeased with Nora, and she had always, I believe, regarded me as being three-fourths of a fool and a quarter of a knave. Her observations were not agreeable; still they were not as offensive as those of Mr.

Gascoigne, who, while maintaining a perfectly polite and urbane demeanor, contrived by various more or less adroit insinuations to goad us into a condition bordering upon fury.

Yet, as will have been surmised from my statement that these charming persons were left to be entertained by three of our number, there were excuses for Mr. Gascoigne. It could not have been pleasant to him to see Hurstbourne lead Miss St. George off to the conservatories immediately after luncheon; he could not, I am sure, have liked the young lady's persistent deafness to his hints that he, too, would be glad to inspect the exotics; and by taking his revenge upon unoffending persons he was perhaps only doing what it is human and natural to do. I can't say that I liked him well enough to be sorry for him; but I endeavored to make allowances and I abstained from inviting him to explain himself when he gave us to understand that his cousin had become mixed up with a disreputable gang of racing men.

"Racing," said he, "is a national pastime which tends, no doubt, to improve the breed of horses throughout the country. It is quite right that it should be supported; only, I should never advise any man to engage in it unless he could afford to do so *en grand seigneur*."

"His Grace," observed Lady Charles, "would always do that."

Thereupon, Mr. Gascoigne laughed a little and inquired whether his Grace was a millionaire. "Only millionaires," he was good enough to inform us, "can race without betting, and only people who don't mind losing their money can bet without involving themselves

in transactions which a *grand seigneur* would feel to be impossible for him."

I hardly know how he managed to convey to us the impression that in his opinion Hurstbourne's position was absurdly incompatible with that of a *grand seigneur*; but such was the impression that he did convey, and he conveyed several others equally unflattering into the bargain: so it was no wonder that, after a time, a fine natural color asserted itself through Lady Charles's powder and rouge, or that Nora affected to be profoundly interested in the contents of a book which she had snatched up at random from the table.

Those plants seemed to require a great deal of examination. I believe that I am guilty of no exaggeration when I say that a good solid hour had elapsed before Lady Deverell lost patience and requested that a servant might be despatched in search of her niece.

"Leila is a most good-natured girl," said she, "but I doubt whether she knows anything at all about botany, and I really think she has been victimized long enough. Besides, it is high time for us to be going."

Mr. Gascoigne rose with alacrity and offered to start in quest of the truants; but Lady Charles said we would all go, and the upshot of it was that we all went. Through the conservatories we trooped, a grim and silent phalanx, Lady Charles leading the way and the rest of us following; we visited the palm-house and the intermediate houses and hot-houses and even the stove-house, where the big Farleyense is; but nowhere were we rewarded by a sign or a trace of our quarry! At last, somebody—the humble writer of these lines, perhaps, put forward a timid suggestion that it might be worth while to draw the stables; and in the stable-

yard, sure enough, we found Hurstbourne and Miss St. George, seated upon a couple of inverted buckets and conversing as unconcernedly as if nothing had been further from their thoughts than that they had for some time past been causing five respectable persons to use inward language quite unfit for publication respecting them. Hurstbourne was smoking a cigar and looked, as I have no doubt he felt, perfectly contented.

“Oh, there you all are,” he said, as we hove in sight, “we were just wondering what had become of you.”

One or two of us—I was one—responded by a feeble sort of giggle; but Lady Deverell is not given to giggling when she is angry.

“What are you dreaming of to sit out of doors in this cold air, Leila?” she asked. “I understood the Duke to say that he wished to show you the conservatories; though I might have guessed that he would be more at home with grooms than with gardeners. I don’t know at what hour you ordered the carriage, Mr. Gascoigne, but unless we start at once, we certainly shall not reach Lavenham before nightfall.”

Mr. Gascoigne went off to look for his coachman, while Miss St. George, who did not appear to be much in awe of her aunt, explained that she was not in the least cold and that she agreed with the Duke of Hurstbourne in preferring horses to flowers.

“You won’t forget your promise of coming over some day to inspect your cousin’s stud, will you?” she added, turning to her host. “As I told you, it isn’t much of a stud, because he isn’t a hunting man, still he has one or two animals that you might care to run your eye over, and if it won’t be troubling you too much, I should

like you just to try that mare of his which he says can carry a lady."

To an unprejudiced listener this sounded pretty cool, but Hurstbourne seemed to think it all right, and declared, with a foolish air of gratification, which made me long to wring his neck, that he would not for the world allow Miss St. George to mount any animal without having previously ascertained that it was fit for her to ride. What Mr. Gascoigne may have thought must remain a matter of conjecture ; but when he returned to us he seconded the invitation which had been given in his name with a tolerably good grace. We should always try to allow the devil his due, and if I can't find anything else to say in favor of Paul Gascoigne, I am at least willing to admit that he possessed the gift of self-command.

It was not until some minutes after our guests had departed that Lady Charles interrupted her son's warm encomiums upon Miss St. George's beauty and amiability by remarking : " My dear Arthur, she may be this, that or the other ; but if she were staying in my house, I shouldn't like her to make herself so much at home. The idea of her asking you to go over to Lavenham, and of that long-legged gaby submissively backing her up ! She hadn't even the civility to ask me either ! "

" Oh," answered Hurstbourne, looking a trifle disconcerted, " I am sure they would have asked you, mother, if they had thought you would care to go."

" *They !*" retorted Lady Charles, with a toss of her flaxen head : " who are *they*, pray ? I was under the impression that Lavenham belonged to Paul Gascoigne. Not, of course, that it ought to belong to him, and not

that I should think of troubling myself to drive all that distance for the privilege of seeing his unpleasant face again and listening to his unpleasant talk. Nor, I sincerely hope, will you do so, Arthur."

Well, it was probably not for the sake of the privileges mentioned that Hurstbourne intended to go there and did go there. I was more than doubtful whether his incentive was even the totally inadequate one which he was pleased to confide to me later in the evening.

"I rather flatter myself that I put Master Paul's nose out of joint a bit to-day," said he, with a mischievous chuckle. "He isn't engaged to Miss St. George yet, and it's not quite a thousand to one certainty that he ever will be. It does that chap a lot of good to let him see that he isn't absolutely invincible."

"But are you so very anxious to do him good?" I ventured to inquire. "I thought you weren't particularly fond of him. If you were, one might understand your sitting upon a stable-bucket and playing with fire. Doesn't it strike you that, if you don't mind what you're about, you may find yourself engaged to Miss St. George one of these fine days? And don't you think that, in that case, Mr. Gascoigne might have the laugh on his side?"

Hurstbourne answered, "Oh, bosh!" and went out of the room. He has a happy knack of leaving the room when he can't hit upon a rational rejoinder.

CHAPTER X.

SOMETHING LIKE A DAY.

HURSTBOURNE, as I have said, went over to Lavenham in spite of his mother; some more definite invitation than that which he had received in my hearing must, I suppose, have reached him by post. Anyhow, he went, and, for my part, I tried to persuade myself that it was just as well that he should go. Miss St. George or another—what did it matter? Sooner or later my poor Nora was certain to be ejected from her fool's paradise, and the sooner she was made to submit to that painful process of eviction the sooner her troubles would be over. I may be mistaken, but my impression is that nine people out of ten recover from the pangs of unrequited affection within a year, or, at the outside, eighteen months. It is true that there always remains the case of the tenth person to be considered, and that is why I was a sorrowful man in those days. Nora might be exceptional: nothing proved to me that she was not so: I could not tell how she was taking it all, and of course I could not ask her. Only I saw by the heaviness of her eyelids and the pallor of her cheeks that she was not getting her fair share of sleep: added to which, she assumed a certain hard gayety of demeanor which was neither natural nor of a nature to

deceive anybody less obtuse than Lady Charles Gascoigne.

All the same, it appeared to deceive Hurstbourne, whose attention, no doubt, was otherwise occupied and who no longer either sought my sister's society or looked as if he missed it. There was no quarrel between them: that little tiff on the way back from hunting of which mention has been made had blown over, and they laughed and joked together as usual when they met; but they did not often meet now, except at meals, nor was the cover removed from the billiard-table any more. Hurstbourne returned from his visit to his cousin in high glee.

"What do you think?" said he. "The hounds are to draw the Lavenham coverts on Tuesday, and Paul is going to give a big breakfast. He doesn't half like it, and I believe he is in a blue funk because we have persuaded him that it is his bounden duty to get on a horse for the occasion. However, as we are pretty sure not to find, and as he has some very sober beasts in his stables, there isn't much chance of his getting chucked," added Hurstbourne regretfully.

"Is that girl a good rider?" inquired Lady Charles, with languid interest.

"I don't know: I haven't seen her in the saddle. But I tried that little mare of Paul's, and an uncommonly nice little mare she is. If there's a run, Miss St. George ought to be able to see it; anyhow, we'll show her the way, won't we, Miss Martyn?"

"I daresay you will, I shan't have that privilege, because I shan't be there," answered Nora.

"Why not?—what nonsense!—what do you mean?" asked Hurstbourne almost angrily.

"Well, I mean, for one thing, that I don't see the fun of fox-hunting without a fox, and for another thing, that I would rather not be preached at again by Lady Deverell if I could help it. Thirdly and lastly, I should prefer to stay at home. There's no use in arguing with a person who says she would prefer to stay at home."

"I also will stay at home," observed Lady Charles, with a laugh and a yawn. "If Mr. Gascoigne wishes for our company, let him have the good manners to ask for it. And then we'll refuse."

Hurstbourne grumbled a little, he could do no less. He said that, even if there were no foxes at Lavenham, there would be foxes somewhere in the neighborhood and that, supposing the worst came to the worst, it was better to be out in the open air than to sit over the fire all day, doing nothing, he should have thought. But he evidently was not particularly keen about Nora's company, and it is superfluous to add that that sad fact was as obvious to her as it was to me. Much to my relief she did not display her true feelings more undisguisedly than she had already done ; though I dare say she might have been painfully explicit without causing that foolish young man to suspect their existence.

The end of it was that I was forced, somewhat against my will, to go with him and see him through. Hurstbourne is one of those good, simple creatures who can't enjoy anything alone and can't understand the failure of other people to enjoy what affords them satisfaction. He must needs always have a friend at his elbow to whom he can impart his joys, his sorrows, his desires and the rest of his ephemeral emotions, and it seemed, for the time being, to be my destiny to fill a part which

would not in itself have been distasteful to me. Only, as sympathetic readers will readily realize, I could not, under all the circumstances, precisely relish the prospect of looking on at his philanderings with Miss St. George.

I am not gifted with that remarkable insight into the thoughts of my fellow-creatures which is boldly claimed by such a number of people in these days, so that I really don't know whether Hurstbourne set forth with the intention of conquering Miss St. George's affections, or only with that of making his cousin jealous; but certainly, when we arrived at our destination, his behavior was of a kind to lend support to either hypothesis. We found a great crowd in the dining-room at Lavenham and met with a cordial reception from everybody, including our host, who was very nicely got up in boots and breeches, but had wisely abstained from donning a pink coat.

"Delighted to see you, Arthur," said he. "I hope we shall be able to show you some sport, but, as you know, that is more the keeper's affair than mine. All I can say is that I gave strict orders upon the subject as soon as I succeeded to the property."

"Any man," observed Colonel Corbin, who chanced to be standing near, "can have both foxes and pheasants if he likes, and any keeper that I ever heard of will kill foxes, if he dares. It's a mere question of whether he has been told that he is to interpret strict orders strictly or not."

Colonel Corbin, it was plain, entertained no sanguine anticipations and did not think it worth while to conceal his sentiments: but as lawn-meets are usually attended by plenty of sportsmen to whom sport is a matter of

secondary importance, Mr. Gascoigne was not, so far as I am aware, distressed by any further speeches of the above uncomplimentary description. He was extremely polite, affable and discursive: no doubt he wished to make himself popular, and to a certain extent he may have been successful. I suppose he could not, for the life of him, have helped being condescending; otherwise he might easily have secured more friends than his money and his position had already earned for him.

He was not, however, so bumptious on that occasion as was his wont: for he was palpably nervous. I saw him mount the big staid roan horse which had been brought to the door for him, I saw his groom indulge in a grin and a wink when his back was turned, but I also saw in a very few minutes that he had been taught to ride. If Hurstbourne expected him to go over his horse's head, Hurstbourne was likely to be disappointed. But Hurstbourne was not looking at his rival, he was helping Miss St. George into the saddle, and for the next quarter of an hour or more he had no eyes for anybody except Miss St. George. That young lady sat well and handled her spirited little mare as if she knew what she was about: of course it remained to be seen whether she was really a horsewoman of Nora's class. Not, to be sure, that that mattered very much: still, I was, I confess, mean enough to hope that she had not all Nora's pluck. It was disgraceful of me to admit such feelings into my mind; but I did admit them, and, as I have humbly owned to them, perhaps one or two very kind and forgiving people will refrain from condemning a frail fellow-mortal.

And now occurred an unexpected and (as I was subse-

quently assured) an unprecedented event. We actually found a fox in Lavenham Woods. There were, I believe, certain people who affirmed—but no matter! The gossip of the hunting-field is only a shade less contemptible than that of the drawing-room, and, whatever may have been the antecedents of Mr. Gascoigne's unique fox, he proved a game one and gave us a rattling spin of forty minutes. It is to be regretted that the gentleman who had thus done his duty by the hunt so nobly and satisfactorily should, through some unfortunate mishap or other, have been thrown out at the very beginning of the run. I saw nothing of Mr. Gascoigne after we got away, but, on the other hand, I saw a good deal of Miss St. George, who rode with skill and judgment, and fairly earned the brush which was awarded her. As much could not be said for Hurstbourne. It is, or was, Hurstbourne's habit to ride upon a system calculated to make the blood of all beholders run cold. Nobody that I ever heard of thinks of disputing his courage. He has a good seat and tolerably good hands; but I firmly believe that if, at that time (he has reasons for behaving less insanely nowadays), he had seen a seven-foot stone wall in front of him, he would have put his horse at it without troubling himself for one moment to consider whether he was attempting an absolute impossibility or not. In that part of the world stone walls are neither numerous nor lofty; but we had to negotiate some rather awkward fences, and over one of these he managed, in his own words to “come a most superior crowner.” Both he and his horse escaped with a shaking. He was soon in the saddle again, and he galloped up in time to witness the finish with a countenance illuminated by smiles and

adorned by two long scratches, as well as by various smears of mud.

Miss St. George contemplated him with calm curiosity. "Have you insured your life?" I heard her inquire.

And when he answered, laughing, that he had neglected that precaution, she returned: "Do you know, I don't think I would neglect it any longer, if I were you."

He seemed to accept her observation as a compliment, very likely it may have presented itself to him in that light; and while we were jogging along towards Kingstead Gorse, he was most assiduous in his attentions to her and superlative in his praises of the manner in which she had hitherto acquitted herself. Riding close behind them I caught occasional fragments of their dialogue which would have convinced me, if indeed any convincing process had been required, that he was making love to Lady Deverell's niece with the uncompromising thoroughness that was wont to characterize every action of his. Lady Deverell's niece appeared to like it, and there was no reason to suppose that Miss St. George's aunt would dislike it: because, after all, a duke is a duke, though he may have a cousin wealthier than himself. As for me, it was not to be expected of me that I should like it: nor in truth, should I have liked it even if Nora had not, on an ill-starred day, come to take up her abode at Hurstbourne Castle: for, admirably adapted though Miss St. George was to adorn the station of a duchess, she did not strike me as being the sort of woman to render a kind-hearted, hot-tempered, matter-of-fact little man happy.

But the great merit of fox-hunting, as of all other

sports and pastimes worthy to be so called, is that, while the excitement of it lasts, nothing else signifies one farthing : and there was excitement enough in our second run that day to content the most insatiable of fox-hunters. I am not going to describe that historic run. To begin with, I couldn't possibly do justice to its incidents unless I were to ascend or descend into rhyme (a practice which I have abandoned) : added to which, I am sorry to say that I only saw a portion of it. However, I thoroughly enjoyed that portion of it in which I was privileged to take part, and a man whose bones are as big as mine are, knows only too well that he must be a Rothschild into the bargain if he wants his horse to stay forever. My poor old gray floundered into a ditch at last, and gave me to understand, after I had got him on his legs again, that he had shot his bolt. I had not spared him, as perhaps I ought to have done, and I was not even sure that he would be able to carry me home.

One thing was beyond all question, and that was that homeward we must set our faces. So, after a brief breathing space, we started at a foot's pace, threading our way through the sinuous and miry lanes, until we arrived at a public-house, where I thought I had better halt and gruel my exhausted mount. It was almost dark when I hoisted myself once more into the saddle and, catching the sound of approaching hoofs, paused in the hope that some other belated horseman might be able to inform me of the result of the day's sport or at least to direct me as to the shortest way to Hurstbourne Castle.

However, it was a horsewoman, not a horseman, who presently showed up black against the red glow

of the western sky, and, as she approached, I recognized Miss St. George, who drew rein and honored me with a nod.

"I'm sure I don't know," she said, rather crossly, in answer to my first question. "They were still running when I had to leave them, and they looked as if they meant to run until next year. Meanwhile, my mare has dropped lame and I haven't the most remote idea of where I am. I suppose you are acquainted with the geography of this hideous country, aren't you? Perhaps, you wouldn't mind telling me what point of the compass I ought to make for in order to reach Lavenham before I die."

I was not in a position to furnish her with the required instructions; but I made inquiries of the people at the public-house, who were as voluble and incomprehensible as rustics always are under such circumstances. It was very evident that I should have to see her home, which was not an altogether enchanting prospect, seeing that it behoved me to find my own way home, and that that task was likely to take me all my time. She neither protested nor apologized when I proclaimed my generous intentions; she appeared to think that I could do no less. That is what they generally appear to think; though I am quite at a loss to explain why they should. I concluded from certain observations which escaped her, after we had started, that she considered Hurstbourne wanting in gallantry, inasmuch as he had not taken more care of her, and this tickled me so much that it helped me to overcome my incipient sulkiness. As if Hurstbourne was the sort of man to cut himself out of a run for any woman upon the face of the earth.

"I am sure," said I gravely (being perhaps sure of the contrary), "that he would never have left you to take care of yourself if he hadn't been convinced that you were capable of doing that. You must try to forgive him; he probably thought, as I did after seeing you go, that you stood in no need of a pilot."

"I don't require anybody to break my fences for me, if that is what you mean," replied Miss St. George; "but I am not ashamed to confess that I can't find my way instinctively about a country which I never saw before in my life and have no wish ever to see again."

She was so obviously out of temper that she rendered me quite cheerful, in spite of all the good reasons that I had for feeling depressed.

"I am very sorry," said I, "that you don't like this part of the world and don't wish to revisit it. Hurstbourne will be very sorry too, and so, no doubt, will Mr. Gascoigne. By the way, Hurstbourne may have imagined that Mr. Gascoigne could escort you home, if he could do nothing else for you."

My companion made a half-turn in her saddle and contemplated me with a disdain which, I dare say, would have withered me if I could have seen it, but as her back was turned to what little light there was left, I was denied the pleasure of scrutinizing her features.

"From your way of speaking of him," she said, after a pause, "I suppose the duke is an intimate friend of yours."

"I have been acquainted with him since he was a very small boy," I answered. "That accounts for the lack of deference and respect which seems to have struck you, and which would perhaps be only becoming in one of his present subordinates."

She neither resented nor even noticed my snappishness. I was not a sufficiently important person to be worth snubbing ; nor, I frankly confess, did I ever succeed in provoking Miss St. George : although, during my subsequent intercourse with her, I did more than once try my hand at that foolish and hopeless game.

She remained silent for a few minutes, after which she resumed :

“ As you know him so well, and as, according to Mr. Gascoigne, you are employed in managing his affairs, you probably know whether it is true or not that he’s over head and ears in debt.”

“ What is not only probable but certain,” I observed in reply, “ is, that if I were in possession of that knowledge, I should not impart it to a total stranger. But I don’t in the least mind telling you that I know very little more about the matter than you do. The Duke of Hurstbourne might be in debt without my being aware of it ; he might also have been singularly lucky in his racing ventures without having rendered any account of them to me.”

“ Has he been lucky ? ” she inquired, with a touch of eagerness.

“ I have said already that I don’t know. Perhaps he has, and perhaps he hasn’t.”

“ Well,” she remarked in musing accents, after we had ridden on for a short distance, “ most likely he hasn’t. Still, there’s no knowing : it is just possible that he may have a head on his shoulders, though one would hardly suppose so from his style of riding.”

“ You mean,” I suggested, “ that his head won’t remain on his shoulders much longer if he continues to rush at his fences in that mad way.”

She answered quite seriously, "It would be a difficult thing to knock one's head off, but it's as easy as possible to fracture one's skull or break one's neck, and I should say that the duke was in a fair way to do the one or the other. Of course, if anything should happen to him, Mr. Gascoigne would succeed to the title."

I have never met anybody like Miss St. George : nor, I should imagine can there be many people quite so imperturbably and cynically candid. Nora affirms that what puzzles me about the woman is merely her phenomenal stupidity, and that similar manifestations in a man would not surprise me at all. It may be so ; but personally I am inclined to ascribe rather to supreme contempt for her hearer than to density my companion's open avowal (for really it amounted to nothing less), that she was undecided whether to marry the Duke of Hurstbourne for the sake of his title or to wait a little longer, upon the chance of securing the title and Mr. Gascoigne's wealth at one and the same time. She put a great many more questions to me about my patron and friend : she wanted to know whether he was a gambler ; whether he had other vices that I knew of : whether the legitimacy of his birth had ever been called in question ; what he or his mother had done to incur Lady Deverell's dislike, why his father had been cut by the late duke, and so forth. I gave her such information as I thought fit, and then for my own amusement, endeavored to draw her out upon the subject of Mr. Gascoigne ; for I thought it would be interesting to hear her frank opinion of that gentleman. But ready as she was to cross-examine me, she had no notion of being cross-examined in her turn, and she disposed of my modest queries by the simple and effectual method of

leaving them unanswered. In fact, she soon ceased to take any notice at all of me. She had, I presume, found out as much as she wanted to hear, or as much as she thought I could tell her, and for at least a couple of miles we rode on, side by side, in a silence broken only by my perplexed murmurings when we arrived at a sign-post and when I tried to decipher the half-effaced inscriptions upon it. Thick darkness fell upon us by-and-by. I imagined that we must be somewhere near Lavenham, but I was by no means sure of our whereabouts, so that it was a great relief to me to descry a man on a tired horse ahead of us and a still greater relief to be hailed by him in Hurstbourne's familiar cheery voice.

"Hullo, Martyn ! is that you ?" he called out, as soon as he recognized me. "Who have you got with you ? Miss St. George, by Jove ! Well, and how are you both ? Pretty well dead-beat, like the rest of us, eh ? we *have* had something like a day, haven't we ?"

"I was beginning to be afraid," I remarked, "that we were in for something like a night in the saddle too. Do you happen to have any idea of where we are at the present moment ?"

"Bless your soul, yes ! we're within half a mile of Lavenham. I shall have to put my poor old gee into the stable there, and you had better do the same. I daresay Paul will let us have something to drive home in."

He was in such exuberant spirits and so eager to narrate every episode of a run which had terminated gloriously by a kill in the open that he took no heed of Miss St. George's manifest displeasure. Yet he might have known that nothing in the world is more tedious

to listen to than an accurate description of a run in which one has been precluded from participating : and if my perfunctory " ohs " and " ahs " did not convince him of that elementary truth, he was made aware of it at length in a more unequivocal manner by the lady, who said :

" Yes ; we quite understand that you have had capital fun. I suppose it never occurred to you that a stranger who didn't happen to be as well mounted as you were might fail to see the joke of being abandoned to her own devices in a country of which she knew no more than she does of Central Africa."

He then apologized so profusely and earnestly that, by the time that we had reached Lavenham and he had assisted Miss St. George to dismount, his lack of courtesy had been graciously forgiven.

" Only, if you want to show that you are really repentant," said she, " you will send for what clothes you want and stay the night here. I don't doubt for one moment that you would much rather go home : but you admit that you deserve some punishment, and a form of penance which confers some slight benefit upon others ought to be especially welcome to you. Words can't convey any notion of the dulness of the evenings that I have been spending of late with my aunt and Mr. Gascoigne."

It is not impossible that, despite the fascinations of Miss St. George, Hurstbourne would have preferred to go home. He was somewhat in awe of his mother, and I think also he was not anxious to accept more hospitality than he could help from his cousin. But his scruples were vanquished when Mr. Gascoigne came out to meet us, and when Miss St. George said coolly :

“I have just been telling the Duke and Mr.—er—the other gentleman that we can’t turn them out in the cold again at this hour of the night and that they had better dine and sleep here. There will be time for a groom to go over to Hurstbourne Castle and fetch their things before dinner, won’t there ? ”

I don’t know whether it was Paul Gascoigne’s polite entreaties or his wry face that prevailed upon Hurstbourne to yield : but I should imagine that in all probability it was the latter. He hated Paul Gascoigne so much that I believe he could not resist any chance of fighting him, either with or without the gloves—which was not at all the spirit in which he was accustomed to meet an adversary.

“Oh, rubbish ! ” said he, when I modestly requested that I might be sent home with the groom : “you must stop and see me through. Besides,” he whispered, as we ascended the staircase together, “it’s going to be grand sport. That beggar is positively yellow with jealousy ! ”

I said “Take care ! ” and he answered impatiently, that of course he would take care. And of course there was not the slightest chance that he would do any such thing.

CHAPTER XI.

A CONGENIAL PARTY.

DIFFERENT people have different methods of expressing the ire which has to be expressed somehow or other, but which good manners forbid them to put into language. Lady Deverell, when she is angry, lets off steam, so to speak, by blowing her nose loudly, frequently and unnecessarily. Now, on entering the drawing-room at Lavenham, arrayed in the evening garb which had been duly delivered to me just as the dressing-bell rang, I perceived that Lady Deverell was the sole occupant of that vast saloon, and also that she was blowing her nose. It was, therefore, very evident to me that I was going to catch it—and, sure enough, I did.

“Your duties,” she began, “don’t appear to be very arduous. May I make so bold as to ask whether you do anything at all when you are at Hurstbourne Castle?”

I replied that on most days of the week I did a great many things; whereupon she wanted to know what things.

“Well,” I said, “the management of the estate is in my hands and I keep all the accounts.”

“Oh, indeed!” she returned, with a snort. “The keeping of the accounts must be very interesting and satisfactory work, from all that I hear, and

no doubt you give your entire mind to it. Your labors don't seem to prevent you from treating yourself to a whole holiday as often as you like, though."

To attempt to defend oneself against the attacks of an irritable old woman is, I take it, a sheer waste of time. Consequently, I made no reply, but listened patiently while I was told, in more or less plain terms, that I was going to the deuce, and that Lady Deverell was very glad my poor dear mother had been spared the spectacle of her son's degradation. But of course it was not really with me that her ladyship was so wroth, and when she had whetted her teeth upon my blameless and defenceless character, she proceeded, as I knew she would, to fall upon her genuine quarry.

"I suppose it would be absurd," she remarked, after she had said every ill-natured thing about Hurstbourne that she could possibly say, "to expect good taste from his mother's son; but I do rather wonder at his having forced poor Mr. Gascoigne to put him up for the night when there wasn't the slightest necessity for it. Generous and liberal as Mr. Gascoigne is, he can't have much friendly feeling for a man who strained every nerve to keep him out of Parliament, and, political considerations apart, the Duke of Hurstbourne is scarcely the sort of person whom he would have wished to have in his house, if he had been allowed any choice in the matter."

"Liberality and generosity," I replied, "are not always interchangeable terms, and I would not for the world cast a doubt upon the liberality of so staunch a Conservative as Mr. Gascoigne. That he is generous we all know, and I feel sure that, in this instance, his generosity has not been misplaced. Upon my

honor as a gentleman, I do not believe that Hurstbourne will pocket the forks and spoons ; still, if, as a measure of precaution, Mr. Gascoigne would like to have him searched before we leave, I have nothing to urge against it. Only I hope, for the sake of my nose and my front teeth, that I shall not be the person told off to search him."

"My poor young friend," returned Lady Deverell, who, I was glad to see, was highly incensed by my rejoinder, "very few people know how to be clever, and every child knows how to be impertinent. If you can't find anything better than that to say in defence of your friend, I should advise you to hold your tongue."

Well, at all events, I had put this arrogant and religious lady into a rage, and I don't know what more I could have done. I was quite contented with that humble triumph. However, I am free to confess that she might have turned the tables on me and put me into a rage if our conversation had not, fortunately, been interrupted by the entrance of our host and Miss St. George, who had apparently met outside the door and who were in the midst of a temperate discussion as to the relative merits of hunting and shooting.

"Of course," Mr. Gascoigne was saying, "I admit that one of the obligations imposed upon all landed proprietors is to preserve foxes, and I think that, as a rule, they recognize this. They must give and take ; only what we shooting men sometimes venture to complain of is, that all the hunting men are more ready to take than to give. They are under the impression that everything and everybody ought to yield to them, and we can't altogether share that impression."

"How many times have your coverts been drawn

this season?" inquired Miss St. George blandly.

"Once only, and that was by invitation. The draw, as you know, resulted in a find. I make no complaints; I merely wonder what the foxhunters have to complain about. After this, perhaps I may be permitted to shoot my own pheasants."

Then Hurstbourne joined us and must needs put his oar in. Doubtless he thought his cousin was in the wrong, and doubtless his cousin was in the wrong; but the occasion was hardly a propitious one for saying so, and he got the worst of the argument. Miss St. George, who promptly retired from the fray, looked on at it with—as I surmised—the calm and amused indifference of one who was aware that it was being fought upon a false issue. Not on account of foxes or pheasants was Hurstbourne becoming red in the face and Mr. Gascoigne frigidly sarcastic; there was quite another bone of contention between them, and the bone knew that as well as I did. Possibly Lady Deverell, who continued to blow her nose noisily in the background, knew it too.

I can't tell whether Miss St. George enjoyed herself or not during dinner; very likely she did. But I am quite sure that not one of those who sat at meat with her was happy. We got off the subject of sport, after a time, and attacked that of politics—which was scarcely a change for the better. Mr. Gascoigne chose to identify his guest with his late opponent and to assume that the former professed all the radical views entertained by the latter. Now, it was a very simple matter to make fun of those views in a quiet, courteous way, and a still simpler matter to point out the absurdity of their being held by a duke. Poor Hurstbourne

made a fool of himself, said several things that he did not mean, had to confess that he had failed to see the logical outcome of his opinions, and was finally driven to appeal to one of the weaker sex for support.

“Look here, Miss St. George,” said he, “I put it to you as a disinterested outsider: wasn’t I justified in expecting that a constituency which had always voted Liberal would go on voting Liberal even after one of our family had seen fit to turn his coat? Mind you I’m not saying that this, that, or the other measure ought to be carried; I only ask you whether it wasn’t fair to anticipate that the majority of the electors would stick to the old flag?”

Miss St. George roused herself from a fit of abstraction to say, “Well, you see, I don’t quite know what the old flag was. Wasn’t it the Union Jack that Mr. Gascoigne kept on waving before their eyes?”

This question, as it may have been intended to do, cast fresh fuel upon the flames, and the altercation which ensued certainly appeared to show that Hurstbourne was one of those unpatriotic citizens who are prepared to lend their aid to the gradual disintegration of the Empire. Yet, though he got the worst of the encounter, he might, if he had cared to do so, have plumed himself upon the achievement of a success somewhat akin to that which I myself had accomplished against Lady Deverell; for he had obviously made his cousin angry. It took a good deal to make Paul Gascoigne angry, and I don’t think that any amount of political heterodoxy on Hurstbourne’s part would have produced that effect upon him. Thus it became rather amusing to watch the demeanor of Miss St. George, *arbitra pugnæ*, and to note the impar-

tiality with which she alternately soothed and urged on the combatants.

Still this was not so amusing but that I was sincerely glad to see her and her aunt leave the room. Rows are always to be deprecated, and they are more especially so when one's own side seems likely to come out of them with loss of breath and loss of glory. We cooled down and grew very distant and polite after the ladies had quitted us; nor was it long before we followed them. I don't know what took place then between the rivals and the rather unworthy subject of their rivalry. Whatever Nora may say, I don't believe that Miss St. George was a stupid woman, and I have the best of reasons for conjecturing that she spent a pleasant evening. However, I can't uphold my conjecture by any report of personal observations; for no sooner had I entered the drawing-room than I was imperatively beckoned to seat myself beside Lady Devorell, who, it appeared, had not yet done with me.

"You were pleased to rebuke me before dinner," she began. "You need not apologize for it."

"I wasn't going to apologize," I interpolated meekly.

"You would have done so if I had given you to understand that I expected it, and you would have been right to do so, because you certainly expressed yourself in an uncalled-for and impertinent manner. But I don't ask you to apologize, nor do I quarrel with you for standing up for your friend. Whether you have chosen your friend wisely time will show. I may be allowed to have my own opinion as to that. But what I was going to say to you when we were interrupted, and what my conscience compels me to say to you now, is that you have made a very great—I fear I might almost

call it an irreparable—mistake in permitting your friend to provide a home for your sister. As you know, I was strongly opposed to the arrangement; it was persisted in, notwithstanding my protests, and since I have been here I have heard more than enough to convince me that exactly what I foresaw has happened. Your sister and the duke have been seen together at all hours of the day, without even so poor a chaperon as Lady Charles Gascoigne to look after them. People have begun to talk; and I leave it to you to judge who is likely to be the chief sufferer from such gossip."

This was not pleasant hearing for me; but I forced out a laugh, and said the sort of thing which, I suppose, men always do say under similar circumstances. We know—or, at any rate, most of us do—that gossip is not a thing which any girl can afford to treat with contempt; but we take up high ground when our sisters are attacked, partly because we are infuriated with the malicious women who attack them, and partly because we can't see any other dignified attitude to adopt.

"That is all very fine," observed Lady Deverell, when I had finished; "but you must bear in mind that you are not the only person, nor even the principal person interested in protecting Nora from slander—for I am quite ready to admit that it is probably slander. You owe some account of your actions, and she owes an account of hers, to Mr. Burgess, who would be both grieved and displeased if he were to hear the things that I have heard during the last few days."

"Well, suppose you impart them to him," I replied, subduing a strong inclination to break faith with Nora by announcing that she no longer owed anything at all to Mr. Burgess. "Then he will know the worst, and

we must endeavor between us to bear the brunt of his grief and displeasure."

Lady Deverell shook her head. "We are approaching the season of Lent," she remarked. "Have you in your neighborhood any properly qualified priest to whom Nora can make her confession, as we all ought to do before Ash Wednesday?"

"We are without that privilege," I answered; "we have no priest within hail of Hurstbourne Castle only an old-fashioned country parson, who would be frightened out of his five wits if any lady offered to confess her sins to him. Let us trust that Nora has not a great many deadly sins to avow. If she has, I can't see anything for it but that Mr. Burgess should undertake a journey to the north and give or refuse absolution, as may seem expedient to him."

Lady Deverell, whose eyes were at that moment fixed sternly upon the little group at the other end of the room, cannot, I presume, have heard what I said; for she rejoined quite irrelevantly, "Well, it makes no difference to me, because we shall leave the day after to-morrow. Don't say that I didn't warn you, that's all."

I assured her that I would bring no such unjust accusation against her, and, further, that I should not in the least mind if her sense of duty should lead her to convey a warning to Mr. Burgess into the bargain. I did not understand at the time why it was that she tried to look indignant, yet could not altogether banish an incipient grin of satisfaction from her hard-featured countenance. Afterwards I realized that she might not be unwilling to do what she could towards promoting a flirtation between the Duke of Hurstbourne and

any woman in the world, save her niece ; but I should have been infinitely more clever than I have any pretension to be if I had arrived at that conclusion without feminine aid. How was I to guess that she hated Hurstbourne as only a deeply religious lady can hate, or that his coronet had none of the charms in her eyes which coronets of that exalted description almost invariably possess for her sex ? As little could I divine that she was anxious both to wash her hands of responsibility and to obtain a plausible excuse for declaring that I was insanely desirous of placing those strawberry-leaves upon Nora's brow.

We all went early to bed ; for, although Mr. Gascoigne's cigars were excellent, his personal attractions were scarcely strong enough to detain two weary men in the smoking-room for more than half an hour, and Hurstbourne was too sleepy to go on sparring with him, sleep having been murdered in my case by the distressing reflections with which that old woman had provided me, and which indeed kept me tossing to and fro half the night through.

It does not seem probable that Miss St. George's slumbers were seriously interfered with by any out-spoken remonstrances which may have reached her from the same quarter ; though it is likely enough that she was remonstrated with before her aunt wished her good-night, and when the next morning reunited our congenial party at the breakfast-table I thought I could perceive in the young lady's face and manner symptoms of something of the kind having taken place. But perhaps, like many better persons than herself, she was apt to be a little silent and sulky at breakfast time.

Possibly she may have been neither the one nor the

other when we had finished our meal and when she managed to give her chaperon the slip. At least when I say that she gave her chaperon the slip, I only mean that she did a thing which her chaperon had not courage or presence of mind enough to forbid, not that she stooped to any subterfuge. She announced without the slightest hesitation that she was going round to the stables with the duke, who wanted to have a look at his horses ; and, as Mr. Gascoigne presently saw fit to follow the couple, it fell to my lot to receive a second homily from Lady Deverell, with which, since it was in all essentials identical with that already reported, I need not weary the reader. I myself was not a little wearied by it, and was more than a little rejoiced when at length Hurstbourne re-appeared to give me my marching orders.

“We may as well ride home, Martyn,” said he. “The gray is all right again, and I’ll send for our traps in the course of the afternoon. All things considered, we may congratulate ourselves upon not having paid too long a price for a real good day’s sport.”

“That is most flattering to us,” remarked Miss St. George, who had accompanied him into the room. “Tedious as you have naturally found us, you feel that a good run has compensated you for the nuisance of having had to submit to us for one evening. Luckily, we shan’t have the chance of putting your forbearance to the test a second time.”

“I only wish there were a chance of your testing it every evening for the next six months !” responded Hurstbourne with fervor.

Whereupon Miss St. George laughed and observed that the forbearance of other people might be tried

rather too highly if that polite aspiration could be fulfilled.

The forbearance of Mr. Gascoigne had, I think, been already strained about as far as it would go. He did not accompany us to the door; he merely shook hands with us and said, rather coldly, that he hoped we would do him the favor to make use of his stables at any future time that might be convenient to us. He was afraid that he should not be able to offer us house-room again, because his Parliamentary duties would compel him to go up to London shortly.

Lady Deverell gave Hurstbourne the tips of her fingers and was kind enough to place the whole five of them within my grasp, saying, "Good-bye. My love to your sister. You had better tell her what I have told you. If she won't listen, so much the worse for her."

Miss St. George did not appear to see me until I was upon the point of vanishing from her view, when she honored me with a vague bow; but she whispered something which I did not catch to Hurstbourne, on taking leave of him.

"What did that old pussy-cat mean?" inquired the latter, after we had mounted our horses and were riding down the avenue. "What was it that she told you?"

"Nothing of any consequence," I replied. "As far as I can recollect, it didn't amount to much more than that I was a bad lot, and that you were another, and that Nora ought not to be living with people of our shady character."

I thought that would stimulate his curiosity and provoke him to put further queries which I should not

have been reluctant to answer, with a due regard to discretion ; but it did not produce that effect upon him. He only laughed and said : " Oh, that was all, eh ? "

We had advanced some little distance on our way without exchanging another word when he turned upon me with a sudden and unexpected question.

" I say, Martyn, did you ever hear what was the cause of my old uncle's quarrel with my father ? "

I shook my head. " I never heard anything about it ; I never was in the way of hearing. Was there any cause, except incompatibility of temper ? "

" That's just what I don't know, and what I have often wondered. I can't ask my mother, because she gets distressed and begins to cry and all that, you know, if the subject is introduced. I thought perhaps Lady Deverell might have told you something. Whatever it was, I suspect that beggar Paul knows a good deal about it." He added, with a short laugh, after pausing for a minute or two : " Well, I've put our cool friend Paul's back up, anyhow. Do you know that, when we were up at the stables just now, he dragged me off, upon the pretence of showing me a couple of colts, to ask me in plain language what my intentions were with regard to Miss St. George ! "

" Oh, he did, did he ? " said I. " And what answer did you make ? "

" The only answer that could be made ; I said I would thank him to mind his own business. Then he had the cheek to tell me that I should consult my own interests best by keeping friends with him ; that he felt more or less responsible for Miss St. George while she was his guest, and that, if I chose to defy him, he might be

compelled to make things uncomfortable for me. Naturally, I defied him then and there, after which he began hinting that there was some disgraceful mystery connected with my father which he could disclose if he were driven to it. It is true that he retracted when I—well, when I pointed out to him what could happen unless he either spoke out or apologized; but I don't think I really misunderstood him, though he assured me that I had."

Now I certainly had heard that the late Lord Charles Gascoigne had been an old rip, and it seemed quite on the cards that he might have done something disgraceful in the days of his youth; but there was no particular use in saying that. I therefore only said what I believed to be true: that our late host was not precisely a hero and that he was evidently jealous. People who are suffering from the pangs of jealousy and who are not dowered with a chivalrous nature frequently, I observe, threaten more than they can perform. Mr. Gascoigne's empty words were of no importance, except in so far as they served to throw some additional light upon his individuality.

Hurstbourne accepted this explanation; it is his way to accept any explanation which relieves his honest mind of harassing misgivings, he shook his shoulders and chuckled and said: "The idea of that chicken-hearted fellow flattering himself that a girl of Miss St. George's pluck would look twice at him! He does lay that flattering unction to his soul, though."

"Why," I asked, "shouldn't a plucky girl marry a chicken-hearted man?—always supposing that he is rich enough. I can't imagine a more courageous act, and, saving your presence, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if

Miss St. George were to prove herself capable of it."

"That's what we shall see, if we live long enough," returned Hurstbourne, gathering up his reins. "Now I don't believe it would do these horses any harm to have a gentle canter across the grass."

CHAPTER XII.

AN ASSIGNATION.

WE did not, on our return home, meet with quite the warmest of welcomes, and I suppose Hurstbourne's conscience and prescience must have alike disquieted him ; for, as we drew near the huge edifice of which he was sole lord and master, he began to assume something of the air of a schoolboy who has broken out of bounds.

"I expect my mother won't be over and above pleased at our having spent the night at Lavenham," he remarked in a confidential tone, while we were dismounting ; "she'll be sure to say that we had no business to accept hospitality from Paul. But we really couldn't help it, could we ?"

"I couldn't help it," I replied rather ungenerously ; "I don't know so much about you."

"My dear fellow, neither you nor I could have ridden another half mile without gross cruelty to animals. Besides, I thought we had all agreed that Paul was to be treated with friendliness. Goodness knows it's no pleasure to me to eat the fellow's food or to drink his wine."

The above feeble excuses were all that he had to

offer to Lady Charles, who, as he had anticipated, took him to task with some severity, for having sojourned in the tents of the ungodly. "I can't see what was to prevent Paul Gascoigne from sending you home, considering that he was able to send a dog-cart to fetch your clothes," she pertinently remarked. "Why on earth did he want you to stay with him?"

"Oh, if you come to that, I don't know that he did so very particularly want it," replied that foolish Hurstbourne, thereby of course answering all the questions which his mother had not put.

Lady Charles grunted and looked wise. Afterwards she condescended to cross-examine me; though I think that she did not stoop so far without a preliminary struggle between her pardonable curiosity and her sense of what was due to the exalted station in which Providence had placed her. I did not tell her a great deal about Miss St. George, because, as I was able to assure her with perfect sincerity, I knew very little about that supercilious young lady; but whether I had spoken or whether I had held my tongue, she would soon have known as much as I did. We could not find Miss St. George in any of the social books of reference to which we had recourse; but it stood to reason that if she was Lady Deverell's niece, she must be well-born, so that the chief question appeared to be whether she was physically and mentally fitted to carry on the illustrious line of the Gascoignes. That, Lady Charles declared was really the sole point which concerned her. Arthur must choose for himself and she would not dream of opposing his choice unless it should be a manifestly unwise one. All the same, I don't think she was free from maternal jealousy, and I don't think she

was displeased when I confessed that Miss St. George had failed to secure my personal admiration.

"Of course," said she, with the air of worldly wisdom which she was fond of assuming and which always seemed to me rather pathetic, considering what a goose the poor woman really was, "of course the girl is trying to catch him. Unfortunately that is what they all try to do, and there is no help for it. Still it doesn't follow that she may not make as good a wife as another. I must manage to see her somehow and have a talk with her."

I suppose it was rather stupid of me to observe that even if Miss St. George should not succeed in espousing the head of the family, the honor of having brought future generations of Gascoignes into the world might still be hers; for I conscientiously believed the match to be an undesirable one, and I ought to have done what I could towards imbuing Lady Charles with my sentiments. But the moment that she realized the rivalry which existed between her son and her nephew she took a side; and naturally it was the wrong side. Without admitting this in so many words, she nevertheless made it plain to a not very acute bystander, and I perceived, to my regret, that Hurstbourne was not going to be scolded or thwarted any more.

As for me, I received a wholly unmerited scolding from Nora, who chose to take it for granted that I had talked her over with Lady Deverell, and who, when I could not deny that she and her actions had been made the subject of some discussion, said it was rather unfair to discuss her behind her back. She was slightly mollified on hearing that I had not divulged her intention of jilting Mr. Burgess; but I did not deem the

occasion an appropriate one for stating that, in my opinion, that intention ought not any longer to be kept secret. She did not mention Miss St. George ; nor did I. Alas ! she was likely to hear all that she wanted to hear, and perhaps a little more, about Miss St. George before she was much older.

I had work to do both in the afternoon and evening, which was a blessing for me, as indeed work always is for everybody. The unemployed members of the household were probably discontented—at any rate, they seemed to be rather bored and rather cross when I saw them—but what could I do to help them ? Trouble was assuredly in store for two, if not all four of us ; still it was out of my power to avert that, and, luckily for me, it was also out of my power to brood over the future, except during an occasional spare five minutes.

Dukes, like humbler mortals, have work to do, and their work, generally speaking, is not of a very interesting kind. Hurstbourne was disagreeably reminded of this on the following morning when the post brought him a request from the mayor of a certain manufacturing town, situated some twenty or thirty miles north of us, that he would be pleased to open the public library which was about to be established in that prosperous borough. Another magnate had consented to perform that pleasing duty, but the other magnate was in bed with a dreadful bad cold, and his Worship appealed to his Grace's well-known kindness of heart to come over, at short notice, and to shed the requisite light of aristocratic patronage upon the proceedings.

“ I'll see them all jolly well hanged first ! ” was Hurstbourne's first exclamation as he threw the document down. “ What the dickens do I know about

books and libraries? And what sort of a speech do they expect me to make, I wonder! I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll say I'm very sorry I can't go, because—because I've got a bone in my leg; but that I'm sure my cousin Mr. Paul Gascoigne, M. P., will be delighted to represent me on the auspicious occasion. How would that answer?"

Lady Charles didn't think it would answer at all. Lady Charles liked ceremonies and could not approve of any plan which would have the effect of thrusting Mr. Paul Gascoigne, M. P., into a position of undue prominence. She said: "My dear boy, I know it is a nuisance, but we shall make ourselves unpopular if we shirk these nuisances, and Mr. Martyn will write out your speech for you."

Mr. Martyn said "thank you very much;" and Hurstbourne, with a growl, went on to peruse the remainder of his correspondence.

When there are women about, one ought to have one's letters brought up to one's bedroom in the morning. I don't suppose there is very much good in my saying this; still, should these words chance to meet the eye of any member of my sex who may be conscious of sufficient strength of mind to act upon them, I feel sure that he will live to thank me. What the eye does not see the heart does not grieve over, and the heart of every woman must needs be grieved if she be not informed of the contents of a letter, the origin of which has been revealed to her by the stamped address upon the flap of the envelope. Now, Lady Charles had been the first to enter the dining-room, while I had been the second. Consequently we were both aware that there was a letter from Lavenham for Hurstbourne and that

it was directed in a feminine hand. Lady Charles had shown it to me, inquiring whether the handwriting was Lady Deverell's, and I had replied that it was not. The inference was obvious.

So we were in a position to form our own conclusions when Hurstbourne, after reading that letter, said, "Let's see; what day is it that they want me to open their beastly library? Oh, Thursday. H'm!—well, I suppose I had better swallow the pill and go. Compose a suitable speech for me, Martyn, will you, like a good chap? Chuck in a good lot of classical allusions and tags of poetry and all that, you know. If one is to do the thing at all, one may as well do it properly."

I said I would do my best. I assumed, and so, no doubt, did Lady Charles, that Miss St. George was to be present at the projected ceremony; but that we were both mistaken seemed to be proved by Hurstbourne's reply to the remark which his mother could not resist making, after an interval of expectation:—

"You have heard from Lavenham, I see. What has Paul Gascoigne got to say to you?"

"Oh, my letter wasn't from him," answered Hurstbourne, with a somewhat exaggerated air of indifference; "it was from Miss St. George. She writes about a dog that I promised that I would try to get for her. She and her aunt are going south in a day or two; so I'm afraid I shan't be able to execute the commission before they start."

All the same, he did contrive to execute it, and on the following Thursday we took a very handsome and well-bred little Halifax terrier to the station with us. In the interim I had composed a speech for my noble patron, which I flatter myself was really brilliant and

scholarly, and I had not only compelled him to learn it off by heart, but had made him spout it out to me several times, with appropriate emphasis and gesticulation. He acquitted himself, upon the whole, very fairly well, and I don't know what Nora, who attended one of our rehearsals, can have meant by saying that such a harangue, coming from the lips of the Duke of Hurstbourne, would have sounded quite as natural, and even more impressive, if I had put it into blank verse. The truth, I suppose is, that my poor Nora was feeling sore and savage; and everybody, I am sure, will agree with me, that the very last weapon which a woman in that sad plight should attempt to wield is irony.

Well, Heaven knows that I bore no malice; nor did Hurstbourne (which was the worst of it), and the whole four of us drove over to Lavenham Road in our best clothes, and an open carriage, and spirits which were at least superficially excellent. The terrier skirmished about over our knees, and, as his antics gave us something to talk about, he was a welcome addition to the party. It was understood, though I don't think any actual statement had been made to that effect, that he was to be dispatched to London by rail; still I may safely say that it was no great surprise to any of us to recognize Mr. Gascoigne's carriage outside the station, or to encounter Lady Deverell and Miss St. George on the platform. For my own part, I confess that I was momentarily surprised on learning that the ladies were not bound for the same destination as ourselves, and that our meeting with them was a mere coincidence, due to the circumstance that the northward and southward expresses happened to pass through Lavenham

Roads within a few minutes of each other. I should have been more than momentarily surprised if I had believed in the coincidence, but of course I perceived at once that what I was looking on at was neither more nor less than an assignation. Therefore, after taking off my hat, and grinning, and saying a few words to which nobody listened, I thought the best thing I could do was to conduct Nora across the line to the down platform, leaving Miss St. George to lavish endearments upon her new pet, and Lady Charles to exchange bitter-sweet amenities with the other old woman.

Hurstbourne and Lady Charles joined us by-and-by. They were just in time to step into the saloon carriage which had been ordered for us—nothing, I am sure, would have induced Lady Charles to travel in an ordinary first-class compartment, now that she was in some sort a dowager duchess—and, if one of them was not contented with the result of the interview which had just come to an end, the other evidently was.

Hurstbourne scarcely pretended that he had met Miss St. George by accident ; he only said that he was glad she liked the dog, and that he believed he had secured as good a specimen of the class for her as there was in the market. Lady Charles was a trifle flushed and out of breath ; she was, in truth, no match for Lady Deverell, being a simple soul, and having a very modest opinion of herself, notwithstanding the respect that she entertained for her son's rank.

The perusal of the morning papers prevented us from interchanging many remarks during our brief transit, and, on arriving at the end of it, we were received with all the honor and pomp which we were entitled to expect.

Readers would probably not thank me were I to

describe at full length a ceremony of which most of them must have only too often witnessed the parallel. It was a ceremony like other such ceremonies, and it was marred by no hitch, unless you could count as such Hurstbourne's unintentional ascription of an apothegm to Marcus Aurelius, which should by rights have been placed to the credit of a later wearer of the purple. After all, it was near enough for all practical purposes, and I don't doubt that, when I subsequently took the liberty of pointing out his slip to him, he was amply justified in retorting that nobody knew the difference between one of those old buffers and another. Having discharged our duties to the public satisfaction, we were entertained at a truly magnificent luncheon by the Mayor; after which somebody presented Lady Charles with a bouquet, and there was, as a matter of course, more speechifying. I had not coached Hurstbourne for a second oration, so that he used his own words, and achieved a success far greater than I could have secured for him with my carefully rounded periods. He was not very discreet. He dragged in politics, which he ought not to have done; he had something to say about the preservation of foxes, which was not altogether appropriate to the occasion, and his style was almost too colloquial to be reported *verbatim* in the local newspapers; but he won the sympathy of his hearers, who cheered him to the echo.

"His Grace," Lady Charles remarked to me, as we rose from the table, "thoroughly understands the art of dealing with his inferiors." She added—in case my mother-wit should not have enabled me to discover as much—that that was a most important art to have mastered in these democratic days.

The art of dealing with his equals may perhaps not have been one with the intricacies of which his Grace was equally familiar; or possibly I may be over-presumptuous in claiming a place for myself and my sister amongst his equals. Either way, I don't think that he displayed conspicuous tact by holding forth to Nora, during our return journey, upon the beauty, the talents and the general distinction of Miss St. George. Nor, to be quite impartial, do I think that it was wise on Nora's part to vie with him in extolling the merits of a lady whom she scarcely knew and whom it was obvious to the meanest capacity that she detested. Lady Charles was compelled at length to take the part of the absent by remarking :

"Well, she is a handsome girl, but, if you come to that, there are plenty of other handsome girls about. I don't see what she has done that you should try to make her out talented as well."

Nora, as I have intimated above, did not really so consider her; but, for my own part, I thought Miss St. George had played her cards tolerably skilfully, and I was confirmed in my opinion by Hurstbourne's amazing assertion that she was, at all events, "too talented by long chalks for a useless duffer like that fellow Paul." Mr. Paul Gascoigne may have been a useless duffer; but I was afraid I knew another individual whom the description fitted equally well and who was in quite as great danger of being made a fool of.

Well, if the poor dear fellow was a fool already, without need of anybody's intervention, and if he couldn't see what was being made as plain for him as plain could be, so much the better! I took comfort from that thought while my sister was betraying her

secret over and over again and escaping detection. After all, I should have hated Hurstbourne if he had been vain enough to detect it, and I was not half as much provoked with him as I was with her. I have often noticed—and I daresay other people may have noticed the same thing, though to the best of my belief they haven't often said so—that women, who are so infinitely more acute than we are, are nevertheless far worse hands at keeping their own counsel under certain circumstances. They always adopt the same transparent system of tactics, and the strange part of it is that they don't always fail in misleading the person whom it is their wish to mislead. As for the bystanders, it is impossible that they should be misled, unless they happen to be as placidly dense as good Lady Charles Gascoigne, and one can't safely count upon meeting with a large number of Lady Charles Gascoignes.

For all that, I could see that Hurstbourne did not altogether like my sister's ready acquiescence in his eulogies of the girl who (as she doubtless imagined) had supplanted her. He was probably conscious of her insincerity, though he could not understand why she should be insincere—which naturally irritated him. I need scarcely say that I was upon tenterhooks the whole time, fearing that he should be enlightened by some unguarded utterance ; and a very great joy and relief it was to me to hear him announce all of a sudden that he was going off to Leicestershire at last to finish the season.

“ It's rather ridiculous to hire a house and stables at Milton for the winter and never use them,” he explained half apologetically ; though indeed there was not the slightest reason to apologize.

I concurred promptly and cordially in his sentiments, as did also the ladies, and I believe that all three of us inquired at one and the same moment when he proposed to start. He did not seem to be in the least affronted by our alacrity, but answered :

“ Well, there isn’t much time to be lost, and if to-morrow won’t be too soon for you, mother, I’ll just fire off a telegram to tell them that they may expect us and I’ll see about arranging for the removal of the horses.”

“ So we are going to get rid of those good people at last ; how glad you must be ! ” I remarked subsequently to Nora, and perhaps it was not a very kind speech to make, though, as all the world knows, cruelty is sometimes kinder than kindness.

She looked me full in the face and replied composedly : “ I am not glad at all ; I am very sorry. You see, when I told you that I hoped they wouldn’t stay long, I didn’t know what good people they were.”

I suppose she understood me, and I suppose she guessed that I understood her ; but for the moment it seemed expedient to say no more. If plainer language was to be resorted to, there would be time enough for that after the disturber of our peace should have departed ; for the present my chief anxiety was that she should maintain her self-control, which might have been shaken, had I forced her into making the most humiliating avowal that a woman can make.

It came within the range of my duty to extort a humiliating avowal from Hurstbourne that evening. I had to tell him that, unless I were made more fully acquainted with the state of his affairs than I had hitherto been, it would be impossible for me to frame my annual budget upon anything like sound financial

principles, and, after a good deal of humming and hawing, he brought himself to the point of making sundry revelations which caused my jaw to drop. I had been pretty sure that some such revelations were in store for me; but I had not imagined that things were quite so bad as they appeared to be, and it was absolutely necessary to warn him that he could not go on at that rate much longer without being quite unequivocally and decisively ruined.

He was a little impressed by the stern rebuke which I thought fit to address to him; but only a little.

“Oh, that’ll be all right,” he concluded by saying; “don’t you worry your sober old head about it. Everybody is more or less in debt, and, so long as these rascals get the exorbitant interest that they demand, it won’t pay them to ruin me, you may be sure. Besides, I’m going to be awfully economical. Besides that again, I’m going to win a pot of money over the spring handicaps. Why, my dear, good fellow, if nothing else would keep me from going to smash, I should be kept from it by the thought of Paul Gascoigne’s triumph in my discomfiture.”

“It would be hard to discomfit him and easy to discomfit you,” I returned, with a sigh; “but I suppose you are bent upon attempting the more difficult enterprise, and there isn’t much use in cautioning you that you are almost certain to fail. If you would reflect connectedly for a matter of five short minutes, you would see that the game isn’t worth the candle; only of course you won’t reflect.”

I can’t think why people are so apt to laugh at me when nothing has been more remote from my intentions than to be funny; but Hurstbourne has always acted

in that way, and he acted in that way now. He proceeded to throw a couple of sofa cushions at my head, and so effected his escape.

“The next thing,” said I aloud, when he had deserted me, “will be that he will engage himself to Miss St. George, which will, indeed, be an economical measure ! It’s a poor consolation to know that she will indubitably throw him over as soon as she discovers that he has very little more than his title to offer her.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MAGNANIMITY OF MR. BURGESS.

HURSTBOURNE and his mother left on the following morning. They were both of them most cordial and friendly in their manner of bidding us farewell, and a good deal was said about my promise that I would entrust Nora to Lady Charles's care during the coming London season ; but I need not say that I had no intention of parting with my sister ; nor, as I could plainly perceive, in spite of her apparent acquiescence, had she any idea of profiting by the glittering opportunity offered to her. They drove off at last, and, I dare say, forgot our existence before they reached the station ; and I am free to confess that the Castle seemed very big and empty and dreary without them.

“*Rien n'est changé*,” Louis XVIII. is reported to have said, when he was restored to his loving subjects, “*il n'y a qu'un Français de plus* ;” and so it was with us and with our life. Nothing was changed ; there was only one person (for the other hardly counted) the less ; but units, of course, often stand for more than thousands, and that is why it is difficult to believe that *Louis le Desire*, who was no fool, can ever have uttered so silly a speech as that ascribed to him under the guise of an epigram. As for my sister and myself, we tried to pretend that we enjoyed being once more alone, and that

we were going to resume the ways and habits which had sufficed for our contentment a short time before ; but I don't think we kept up the pretence particularly well. I was always half hoping, half fearing that she would confide in me, while she, very likely, thought my manner dry and unsympathetic. It could not well be otherwise, now that we shared a secret which neither of us chose to allude to in words. On the third day I encountered Nora, just before luncheon, in the garden, whither I had betaken myself for a breath of fresh air, and I forgot how it was that we began to speak of Lady Deverell.

“ Did she say anything to you about Mr. Burgess ? ”
Nora asked.

“ Well, yes,” I answered ; “ she said something about him. I should have been glad to tell her that you were no longer engaged to him ; but, of course, I couldn't do that without your permission.”

“ I suppose she said I had treated him badly, didn't she ? ”

“ I believe that was the gist of her remarks. Anyhow, she didn't think you were leading the sort of life that a future country parson's wife ought to lead. She also had the kindness to inform me that people were chattering about your having taken up your residence here as the guest of a bachelor—which was sufficiently ridiculous, considering the rank of the bachelor in question.”

“ Utterly ridiculous,” agreed Nora, with only a slight change of color. “ Still she was quite right in accusing me of having behaved badly to Mr. Burgess ; I wish with all my heart that I could have behaved better to him ! But I couldn't.”

"Then why not tell him so and have done with it?" I asked.

"Yes, I shall have to tell him so; there's no help for it. He isn't a bad man, though I know you think he is; and if it were in any way possible—but it really is not possible!"

"Never for one single moment did I suppose that it was," I returned rather impatiently. "Write to him to-day and get the thing over. Depend upon it, you can break the sad news without breaking his elderly heart. It isn't as if you had inherited a comfortable competence, you know."

Nora sighed and made no reply, which caused me to feel that I had expressed myself too brutally; but it was expecting a little too much of me to expect that, with all my troubles and anxieties, I should have any commiseration to spare for Mr. Burgess. Moreover, I was exasperated by the thought that my sister was about to break off her engagement with that old man not because she had no love for him (which of course she could not have) but because she loved somebody else who didn't care a straw for her.

"Ah, if only I had inherited a comfortable competence!" she exclaimed presently. "Then I shouldn't be a drag upon you, and it wouldn't be my duty to marry any man who was willing to support me. Nobody could realize more clearly than I do that it is my duty to marry Mr. Burgess, and for the last few days I have been trying to bring myself to the point of doing my duty; but it's no use. I can't do it, Phil, and I must confess to him that I can't."

There were tears in her eyes, and she looked so miserable that I ought to have said something kind and

consolatory, instead of returning, in surly accents, "Well, well, you told me that before, you know, and there's nothing more to be said about it. All you have to do is to write and tell him what you have told me."

She answered very meekly that she would do so. I can't tell why she thought it necessary to enter upon an elaborate vindication of Mr. Burgess's character, to which I lent an inattentive ear. She was still engaged in extolling the worth of one who had always seemed to me to be about as worthless a member of the community as a respectable parish priest can be, when a fly was seen to drive up to the front-door, whence presently descended a burly figure familiar to both of us.

"Good Heavens, Phil, there he is!" ejaculated Nora, turning pale with consternation.

"And a very good thing too," said I. "Lady Dverell has sent him here to ask you what you mean by it, and in less than five minutes you can give him the desired information. He will lunch with us, and after luncheon I shall leave you alone—for five minutes. Now mind, Nora, he has no right to be inquisitorial or to demand reasons. One reason is quite sufficient for him, and I do implore you not to let him have more than one. If you do, you will be sorry for it afterwards."

The caution may have been superfluous and may also have been a little unfeeling; but I could not forbear from uttering it, and I had no time to be more explicit; because Mr. Burgess was already advancing towards us across the lawn, holding out both his huge white hands. I got the left one, and dropped it immediately after it had touched mine. He profited by its release to place it upon the top of Nora's, which he

held for some seconds in an affectionate clasp while he explained to what circumstances the delightful surprise of his visit was due. He had undertaken to conduct a mission in a northern parish for a very dear friend of his, he said—I wonder why parsons of his type always describe brother parsons as their “very dear friends”—and he had only been obliged to come a little out of his way in order to give himself the pleasure of a short talk with us both. He would be very glad to lunch with us, and was very sorry that he had just missed seeing another very dear friend of his, Lady Deverell, who, he believed, had been staying recently in our neighborhood.

For the life of me I couldn’t resist asking him whether he hadn’t heard from her since she had left Lavenham ; and, as he was a truthful man, he admitted, with a quick side-glance at me, that he had. Then we went into the house together, Nora looking very much like a prisoner who is conscious that even a plea of guilty will not avail to mitigate the punishment due to crime.

I scarcely remember what we talked about during a meal which the presence of the butler and two footmen rendered more formidable than it would have been, had we ventured to dispense with their services, as Nora and I usually did ; but I remember that the labor of keeping up conversation fell entirely upon our guest and myself, my sister hardly opening her lips from start to finish. At the earliest permissible moment I mumbled some excuse and fled into my den. Mr. Burgess had mentioned that it would be necessary for him to catch the four o’clock train, so that there was not a great deal of time to be lost, and my earnest hope was

that he would hear all that it concerned him to hear, if not within the prescribed five minutes, at least within a quarter of an hour.

However, a good half-hour had elapsed, and I was debating whether I ought not to emerge from my retreat and assume a more active part in the proceedings, when a discreet tap at the door was followed by the entrance of the rejected one. My first glance at his face convinced me that he was by no means inconsolable; but he closed his eyes and tried to look very woebegone as he sank into a chair.

“My dear young friend,” said he, “I have just received a severe blow, which, unexpected though it was by me, has not been, I believe, unforeseen by you. Whether I have been fairly or honorably treated I leave it to you to judge; I will only say to you, as I have said to your sister, that I see no alternative open to me but to bow to her decision. I am grieved that such a decision should have been imposed upon her by events with which, perhaps, I am imperfectly acquainted; but I bow to it.”

Being—as I think was but natural—somewhat irritated by the man’s manner, I replied that I really did not know what else he could do. I said it would be mere hypocrisy on my part to pretend that I had ever considered the match a desirable one or that I regretted its abandonment. It had, in fact, in my opinion, been far too hastily arranged.

“So Lady Deverell thinks,” sighed Mr. Burgess. “She may be right; she generally is right, because she is always animated by the kindest and most unselfish sentiments. Still I own that the change which I can detect in your sister’s whole mental attitude has sad-

dened me. She seems to me to have set her affections upon the things of this world, and I greatly fear that she will only find out her mistake when it is beyond the reach of remedy."

"At least," I remarked, "she hasn't set her affections upon you, Mr. Burgess ; and you, I suppose, are more or less a thing of this world. Let us be thankful that she has been preserved from one irremediable mistake, and perhaps it will be time enough to sadden ourselves about her when we are quite sure that she has made another."

I know that it was flippant and impertinent of me to address a man of double my age in that way ; I know he had just cause for complaint, and I know he was, after his fashion, a conscientious sort of mortal. But I was so certain that he would have been less resigned to his fate if Nora had had a little money of her own that I couldn't help being rather rude to him. Besides, I didn't like his half-sneering insinuation, the responsibility for which, I had no doubt, belonged to Lady Deverell.

For the rest, he did not resent my impertinence. He shook his head and looked down at his fat, white fingers and said he was very glad that he had nothing to reproach himself with in connection with the trial which it had pleased Heaven to lay upon him. He was likewise kind enough to assure me that he blamed neither me nor Nora and that he proposed to remember us both in his prayers. Perhaps he thought that we stood in need of being prayed for, and perhaps, if he did, he was not very far wrong. I humbly and penitently admit that I am incapable of thinking or speaking justly about such specimens of humanity as Mr.

Burgess. There are plenty of much worse specimens whom I can understand and sympathize with better ; but possibly that is more my misfortune than my fault. In any case, I had nothing further to say to him which could be accounted worth my while to say or his to listen to ; so presently he departed to take up his mission work, and if, after accompanying him to the door, I made a face at him behind his broad back, it will be conceded that I had a right to relieve my feelings by making a face at somebody.

I showed a thoroughly amiable and contented face to Nora, whom I hastened to rejoin. "So there is an end of that !" I observed. "I hope we may never do a worse day's work."

She smiled at me through the tears with which her eyes were dimmed. "I'm afraid it may turn out to have been a bad day's work for you, Phil," she answered ; "but, useless as I am, I must at all events make some effort to earn my own living now. The unfortunate thing is that there are so very few occupations open to a partially educated woman. There's nursing, and there's the Post-office, and there's art needlework ; I don't know whether one could gain enough to pay for bread and butter by any of those employments at first ; but I should think one might after a time. Do you suppose that Uncle John would give me house-room until I could see my way a little ? He told me that if the worst came to the worst, I might write and ask him for shelter."

"The worst," I remarked, "hasn't yet come to the worst, inasmuch as I haven't yet proclaimed my intention of casting you adrift. I don't know what I have done to justify you in assuming that I am an incarnate

fiend ; but I do know that you will stay here and take care of your forlorn brother until further notice, unless you have made up your mind to quarrel with him."

"I can't do that, Phil," she answered decisively ; "whatever happens, I can't go on living here. The truth is that Lady Deverell was quite right, and that I ought never to have come here. Of course she was right in saying that a girl ought not to be a guest of a bachelor : you yourself felt that, though you won't admit it."

"Is it only in deference to the conventional prejudices of Lady Deverell that you propose to leave this house and apply for a berth in the Post-office ?" I inquired.

She looked at me for a moment, and then answered abruptly : "No, it isn't only on account of that. What is the use of pretending any longer, Phil, when you know it all ?—the whole shame and disgrace and humiliation of it ! It is horrible even to speak of such things ; but perhaps it is better to speak of them once for all—and *never* again—than to go on shirking them. I have seen by your face for a long time that you are disgusted with me, and well you may be ! You can't be more disgusted with me than I am with myself ; but there it is ! This miserable and ridiculous and contemptible thing has happened to me, and I can't even be quite positive that you are the only one who has discovered it. Most mercifully, the duke hasn't ; and I want you to believe, Phil, that it hasn't happened through any fault whatsoever of his. All he meant was to be kind and sociable ; he couldn't possibly foresee that I should become the wretched idiot that I am. Please don't say anything—there isn't anything to be said. Only you

will admit now—won't you?—that it is out of the question for me to go on living here."

I could not tell her that I thought she ought to remain at Hurstbourne Castle, nor could I wish her to do so; all I could say was that I meant to make my home with her and that, when she left, we would leave together. After all, my present appointment, lucrative though it was, was not in every way satisfactory to me, and even if I did not obtain another immediately, we should not starve. I don't think I said much more than that, because I knew what it must have cost her to speak out to me as she had done, and that no conceivable remark could be made upon the subject which would not pain her.

"My dear Phil," was her reply, "I would rather beg my bread from door to door than let you leave the duke, and it isn't only for your sake that I say so. He must have somebody to look after his affairs, and if you desert him, he will make straight for the Bankruptcy Court. I am very grateful to you for wishing to sacrifice yourself and him in order to suit my convenience; but I shouldn't be in the least bit grateful if you were actually to do anything so insane."

We argued the point for some little time; but neither of us, I think, really shook the resolution of the other. However, I so far got the best of the argument that I obtained Nora's consent to a temporary prolongation of existing arrangements. Hurstbourne was not at all likely to revisit his estates for another six months, and during his absence there was no reason why she should not remain with me. That she was anxious to turn her back upon a place which must always be full of painful associations for her I could well understand; but I

could hardly see my way to sparing her that degree of suffering. Rich people, when they are sick or sad, go abroad and travel; poor people must needs have recourse to other methods of living down sorrow. For rich and poor alike it is but a question of time.

CHAPTER XIV.

I COME WHEN I AM CALLED.

Is it the result of centuries of civilization or a mere vague, inherited instinct of barbarism that compels us to keep our troubles to ourselves and to mention them only at rare intervals even to those from whom we could fain have no concealments? North American Indians are said to be our masters in the exercise of stoicism, and the courage which we are inclined to associate with good birth is forever cropping up in the most unexpected quarters. Be that as it may, there is a certain class of sorrows which cannot be discussed with comfort or advantage, and to that class my poor Nora's sorrow belonged. It was tacitly agreed upon between us that the subject must be a forbidden one; during our daily walks and rides we talked about every imaginable subject except that of which we were both thinking; I am sure she knew that I would gladly have consoled her, had consolation been possible, while I, on my side, was only too well aware that she was not the less mortified and miserable because she kept up such a brave show of cheerfulness.

Everything went on as if nothing was the matter; only everything had lost its savor. The days had gone by forever when the bare facts of existence and robust health and of having one another's company,

as well as good horses to ride, had sufficed for our common contentment ; in vain for us Nature set about that slow annual awakening which appeals more to the young than to those who have seen many Springs come and go ; in vain the hedgerows broke into bud and the crocuses and daffodils made bright patches of color in the borders ; in vain the bitter east winds of March yielded to the sunshine and showers of April, and the new year (which ought of course to begin at the vernal equinox instead of in mid-winter) held out flattering promises of change. We knew that the only change which was in store for us was not going to be a change for the better, and it was hardly worth our while to maintain that elaborate affectation of jollity upon which we expended such gallant efforts. The present never forgives and the past never returns : do what we would, we could not be what we had been a few short months before—*ça n'était plus ça.*

It was at this time that I composed a dozen or so of those sonnets which, as a benevolent critic afterwards remarked, had the ring of true pathos. Other critics failed to detect that quality in them, and, upon dispassionate re-perusal, I must confess that I fail to detect it myself. But that is only because I am not a poet. Had I been dowered with the gift of putting my thoughts into appropriate language, I must have been pathetic ; for nobody could have realized more clearly than I did the tragic comedy of the whole situation. What, indeed, could have been more tragicomic than that the life of such a girl as Nora should be unwittingly spoilt by a common-place, good-hearted, nonentity like Hurstbourne ? It is true that very few lives are really spoilt by one unlucky love-affair, and I

naturally hoped that hers would not be; still I almost believe that the first love is the sole genuine one, and, in any case, there was little likelihood of her making a speedy recovery.

Well, I had a sufficiency of prosaic matters to claim my attention during the intervals of poetic inspiration. I suppose the details of Hurtsbourne's gradual progress towards insolvency would not interest the reader as much as they interested me; so I will not dwell upon them. But I may mention that scarcely a day's post came in without bringing demands upon me which I could not meet without imprudence, and that, as the days grew into weeks, it became more and more evident to me that he had plunged out of his depth. I wrote to him again and again, asking him plainly at last whether he wished to sink, since there could be no doubt that his swimming powers must ere long be exhausted. Sometimes he answered, and sometimes he didn't; he might have spared himself the trouble of answering at all, for such replies as he vouchsafed to me were not even remotely to the purpose.

“ You ought never to have let him out of your sight,” said Nora—I was so worried at times that she perceived my distress, and made me tell her all about it; women can always manage to do that with us, and I wish with all my heart that they couldn’t! “ You ought never to have let him out of your sight. You know what he is, and that he can’t help doing what the people about him do, unless there is somebody at hand to put a salutary check upon him. As far as that goes, he knows it himself. I think, if you were a true friend, you would follow him up to London, Phil; you can’t doubt that he would be delighted to welcome you.”

I assured her that I could perfectly well doubt it; added to which, I had duties to perform where I was. Her suggestion struck me as eminently feminine and unpractical; it was no part of my avocations to cling to the tail of a donkey who was bent upon precipitating himself over a cliff, and so I told her. Yet, when, in the beginning of May, I received a somewhat urgent letter from Hurstbourne, begging me to run up to Berkeley Square for a few days, as he was anxious to consult me upon matters of business, I could not do otherwise than obey the summons.

“Now mind, Phil,” was Nora’s parting injunction to me, “you are not to hurry back on my account. I shall be very well taken care of by the servants, and you will probably find that the duke is in much greater need of being taken care of than I am.”

That was a probability which was not to be contested; but I had little expectation of finding Hurstbourne in a mood to be influenced by any wise advice of mine; nor, as a matter of fact, could I induce him to listen for a moment to the statement upon which I embarked as soon as he had done telling me what pleasure it gave him to see me again and what a good fellow I was to have come so promptly when I was called.

“Yes, yes, my dear chap,” he interrupted; “but I really haven’t time to go into figures now. I must be off in a minute, and there are people coming to dinner, and after that I shall have to look in at half a dozen places. To-morrow morning, though, we’ll have a palaver, and then you and the lawyers had better meet and try to muddle things out somehow among you; I’ll be hanged if *I* can make head or tail of them!”

For a few seconds he stood pinching his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and looking a little glum ; then he pulled himself together, glanced at his watch and hurried towards the door of the library in which he had received me.

“ I can’t stop,” said he. “ You’ll make yourself at home and order what you want, won’t you ? Why didn’t you bring Miss Nora ? I wish you had. There’s a room all ready for her, you know, as soon as she cares to come and occupy it ; but my mother will arrange about that with you.”

Lady Charles, when I went upstairs to pay my respects to her, was indeed more pressing in her kindly offers of hospitality than I could have wished her to be, and it was no easy task to make the excuses which had to be made. There was, of course, no ostensible reason why Nora should not come up to town at once ; I could only fence this question by saying that perhaps she would come by-and-by ; that she was a little out of sorts at present and scarcely fit to face much fatigue, and so forth. I daresay Lady Charles might have smelt a rat if she had not been the most unsuspecting of women, and if she had not been a good deal pre-occupied with her own affairs and those of her son.

“ I am afraid Arthur has been getting into difficulties,” she said rather anxiously—her speaking of Hurstbourne as “ Arthur ” instead of “ His Grace,” was always a sure sign of mental disquietude on her part—“ has he told you about them ? No ? Well, it isn’t really serious, I hope ; though he has been quite extraordinarily unfortunate with his horses so far.”

“ If he is in difficulties, he must be persuaded to retrench,” I observed.

"Oh, yes ; I am sure he will do that, if necessary. But in the meantime he must live in a style befitting his rank, and it would be a great mistake to submit to the arrogance of Paul Gascoigne, who loses no opportunity of reminding people that he is the late duke's heir. He has been entertaining as profusely and extravagantly as if he were some mushroom American millionaire, which, unluckily, is just the sort of vulgar self-assertion that succeeds in these days. Our purse is not long enough to compete with his ; but at least we do mix in society as good as he can secure and perhaps a little more select. The Duke and Duchess of Saxe-Groschen-Pfennighausen are dining with us to-night."

That was indeed a legitimate cause for pride and gratification, and I had nothing to say in disparagement of it. I don't know that it costs much more to entertain Royalties at dinner than to provide a similar repast for mere British commoners, nor would it have been at all beyond the Duke of Hurstbourne's power to feast Royal personages in that way, if only he had kept within his income in other respects. But, as Nora had too truly said, he could not help doing what those about him did, and the magnates of the turf are, I take it, for the most part men of considerable wealth.

I had not the honor of sitting down to table with their Serene Highnesses. My evening repast was served to me in another room, with many apologies and full explanations of the inexorable law of etiquette. Later on I was vouchsafed a glimpse of these exalted beings, as well as of other starred and ribboned individuals, in the drawing-room, but Hurstbourne and his mother went off to some entertainment the moment that their

guests had departed ; so it was not until the following morning that I was enabled to enter upon matters of business and finance. Then I was closeted for half an hour with my patron and with a grave representative of the firm of family lawyers, and then it was that my worst apprehensions were more than confirmed. Things were very bad indeed, and, as far as I could see, were going to be worse. It was not only that large sums had already been borrowed and that mortgages were freely spoken of, but that there were heavy debts of honor which must absolutely be discharged forthwith, and which there was not anything like enough of money in the bank to defray.

“ It just comes to this,” I said at length : “ you may be tided over this crisis ; but only on condition that you enter at once upon a strict course of economy, which will have to be persevered in for several years to come. If you haven’t strength of mind enough to face that necessity, nobody and nothing in the world can save you from permanent ruin.”

The man of law backed me up, though he stated his views with rather more deference and circumlocution ; but Hurstbourne did not seem to be greatly impressed by either of us. He said we should have to do the best we could and that, if he was to come to grief, he must come to grief.

“ Anyhow I’m not quite at my last gasp yet,” he added. “ The luck must turn some time, and, if there’s any justice, I ought to win a pot of money at Kempton Park and Manchester and Sandown. You fellows don’t understand that no man can race without running risks.”

I ventured to think that was just what we did under-

stand ; but he was not amenable to the dictates of reason and common sense. Afterwards he told me confidentially that it was a sheer waste of breath to talk to him about reducing his establishment and selling his thoroughbreds, at that particular juncture. For various reasons, the thing couldn't be done just then without an immense pecuniary sacrifice ; added to which, everybody would laugh at him if he were to show the white feather so soon after having made a bold start. "And even if I didn't mind being laughed at by everybody else, I couldn't stand being laughed at by Paul Gascoigne. Do you see ?"

I saw ; and I said I was very sorry to see that he was such an unspeakable ass ; whereat he burst out laughing. In replying to some further observations and questions of mine, he informed me that Miss St. George was in London with her aunt and that he met her pretty frequently.

"It would do you good to watch Paul's sour face when I dance with her," said he. "Paul can do one or two things ; he's a tolerably good speaker, I believe, and of course, with all his money, he can give his friends a first-class dinner. But he can't dance, and Miss St. George can."

I doubted whether it would make me much happier to look on at the spectacle alluded to ; but, such as it was, I was privileged to witness it that evening, when Hurstbourne and Lady Charles kindly insisted upon dragging me to a ball at which Lady Deverell and her niece were also present. Hurstbourne's attentions to the latter lady were so marked that everybody noticed them ! I suppose he must have intended them to be noticed. As for Mr. Gascoigne, he certainly did look

sour ; and so, for the matter of that, did my esteemed friend Lady Deverell.

“ So you have come up from the country,” were the first words with which her ladyship greeted me. “ You have been sent for perhaps? Not that you are likely to do much good, if all that I hear is true. Have you brought Nora with you? ”

I replied that I had not done so, as I had hoped only to be detained a few days in London. In answer to further interrogatories, I had to admit that my stay was likely to be a longer one than I had anticipated ; whereupon Lady Deverell surprised me a little by rejoicing :

“ Then I hope you will let Nora come to me while you are here. You can’t leave her at Hurstbourne Castle all by herself ; and really, if you will believe me, Lady Charles Gascoigne is not the sort of chaperon whom your poor dear mother would have chosen for her daughter. May I write to Nora to-morrow and tell her that you consent to my taking charge of her for a time? I am obliged to take my niece about, so that she need not be afraid of being dull, and I am sure you, on your side, must feel that she will be rather safer with me than with those people.”

No doubt she would ; although the obstacles which I saw in the way of her accepting hospitality from “ those people ” might not be precisely the ones alluded to by Lady Deverell. I was not quick-witted enough to guess why this old friend of ours was so anxious to assume the temporary guardianship of my sister ; I thought she really meant to be kind, and I thought also that I might do a great deal worse than take advantage of her proffered kindness. It was evident to me that I

should have to stay on in Berkeley Square; I was very uneasy about Hurstbourne and did not want to leave him, if I could possibly help it; yet supposing that I did stay, it would be almost impossible to resist the importunities of Lady Charles, unless I either told her the truth (which was out of the question), or could plead as an excuse that Lady Deverell, who, after all, had provided my sister with a home when we had been deprived of our own, possessed a prior claim upon Nora's companionship.

Actuated by these considerations, I said: "Well, thank you; it is very good of you, and I will write to Nora about it. I don't know whether she is particularly ambitious of coming up to London; but I am afraid I shall not be able to return north yet awhile."

"That is all settled then," returned Lady Deverell, who appeared to think that the assent of the person chiefly concerned was a *quantité négligeable*. "She shall be made welcome, and I hope there is no necessity for me to assure you that I shall be very careful to avoid introducing her to anyone of whom your mother would have disapproved. Of course I am not responsible for her being already acquainted with the Duke of Hurstbourne."

"I should never dream of being so unjust as to hold you responsible for that calamity," I answered; "you can't even prevent your own niece from dancing with the wicked duke, I observe."

I think Lady Deverell must have been deprived of her self-control by the episodes of the evening; for, instead of snubbing me, she said: "Leila is an obstinate, contradictory fool!" Then she dived into her pocket,

drew forth a big pocket-handkerchief and blew a resounding blast upon her nose.

“Not,” she resumed, after a pause, during which she may have had time to reflect upon the imprudence of her language—“not, mind you, that I am in the least degree afraid of your ducal friend. He is three parts ruined already, and before this time next year he will probably be residing at Boulogne or some such place upon an allowance made to him by his trustees. No ; it is nothing to me whether he dances with my niece or with somebody else on the brink of a volcano. You, I am afraid, are likely to suffer when the crash comes ; but that is only what I foresaw and forewarned you of from the outset.”

Not being ready with any adequate rejoinder, I fell back and, shortly afterwards, effected my escape. Full well I knew that the crash was coming ; perhaps it was a good thing that, in view of its imminence, Nora should be furnished with an unamiable, yet useful and wealthy protectress.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DOWN-HILL ROAD.

I WROTE to Nora, and in the course of a few days had a reply from her to the effect that she had received Lady Deverell's invitation and intended to accept it. "I am sure you are quite right to remain in Berkeley Square," she told me; "and for the reason that you know of, it wouldn't be possible for me to join you there. So I ought to be, and I am, very grateful to Lady Deverell for having helped me out of a difficulty. I don't exactly expect to enjoy myself with her; but I couldn't very well have stayed on here for an indefinite length of time without you, and I hope I am not quite such an idiot as you naturally take me for. I mean, I am still capable of being amused and of conducting myself properly in fashionable society."

Fortified by these assurances, I proceeded to break the news to Lady Charles Gascoigne, who, as I had anticipated would be the case, was not best pleased.

"I thought," said she, "it was an understood thing that your sister was to come to us. I must confess that I am surprised at her preferring to place herself under the wing of that horrid old cat, who doesn't really know anybody and who won't be able to take her to the best houses."

I humbly submitted that winged cats are *rara avis*, and that if Lady Deverell belonged to that species, she might manage to achieve higher social flights than it had hitherto been worth her while to attempt. "You see," I remarked, "she is now in charge of an ambitious niece who will probably find means of admittance into the best houses. Besides, Nora is under obligations to her which can't be forgotten or set aside. I am sure you will admit that as readily as you will admit that one isn't always free to consult one's personal inclinations."

Lady Charles was too good-natured or, it may be, too indifferent to quarrel with us; but Hurstbourne, on being informed of the arrangement which had been made with my sanction, astonished me by the vehemence of his protestations against it.

"I tell you frankly, Martyn," said he, "that I call it deuced unfriendly. If your sister doesn't care to come and stay with us, well and good: that is a question for her to decide according to her taste, and I wouldn't for the world urge her to enter this pandemonium against her wish. But, since it seems that she does want to see what a London season is like, I really think she might have established herself somewhere else than in the enemy's camp."

"Why will you persist in calling it the enemy's camp?" I asked. "What is the use of regarding people as enemies who haven't injured you and who, as far as I am aware, have no intention of injuring you? Lady Deverell is upon visiting terms with your mother, you know."

Indeed I had ascertained that a sort of ill-tempered treaty of peace had been concluded between these two ladies and that they shook hands when they met,

although they would doubtless have preferred to scratch out one another's eyes.

"Oh, it isn't that," returned Hurstbourne; "I don't care a button whether old Deverell loves us or hates us, and she doesn't make much disguise of her hatred. I only call her the enemy because she is hand and glove with Paul Gascoigne, who is our enemy if ever we had one. Moreover, I can't see why you should be so eager to thrust your sister into the degraded mob which goes by the name of London society. She would be a great deal better off and a great deal happier down in the country—where I wish to Heaven I was! However I suppose neither you nor she will be deterred by anything that I can say."

I answered that I had no fear of my sister's being contaminated, but that I should sincerely rejoice if he would lend the force of example to his admirable precepts by quitting a society which he professed to despise and which was evidently becoming far too expensive for him. Thereupon he frowned and grunted and went away. It was easy enough to put the poor fellow to silence by alluding to his pecuniary embarrassments, and it was not very generous of me to adopt that method with him: all I can plead is, that it was necessary to shut him up somehow or other.

I went to meet Nora at the King's Cross station, on her arrival, and drove with her to Lady Deverell's house in Upper Grosvenor Street. She seemed to be in better health and spirits than when I had parted from her, and she laughed as she implored me not to pull such a long face.

"I really am not going to die, Phil," said she; "my disease isn't a mortal one, as everybody is aware, and I

shall be convalescent before you know where you are. I have brought a large supply of tonics with me in the shape of good resolutions, and I daresay Lady Deverell will kindly provide others in the shape of respectable marriageable gentlemen. So, if you please, we will treat bygones as bygones henceforth and forever."

"Very well," I answered—for in truth that appeared to me to be our wisest plan—"but the respectable, marriageable gentlemen aren't bygones."

"Only one of them. The others belong to the future, and when they belong to the present we will discuss them as much as you like. Not that we shall have much to discuss, because if they are marriageable and respectable, nothing more will be required of them."

"Something more will be required of them by me," I remarked. "I don't suppose you mean what you say, Nora; but if, by any chance, you did, you would be rather inconsequent, wouldn't you? Why did you break off your engagement to Mr. Burgess, pray?"

"Well—because he was Mr. Burgess. Some people are impossible; others are perfectly possible, though they may not be the precise embodiment of one's romantic dreams. I know what you are thinking; but you are mistaken. I am not going to accept the first man who asks me out of pique or in order to punish somebody to whom that would be no punishment at all; only it is obvious that I must either marry or become a burden and a nuisance to my nearest male relative. Consequently, I have made up my mind to marry; and consequently I am now on my way to stay with Lady Deverell."

"Then," I returned, "all I can say is that I hope nobody will ask you."

"If nobody does, there will still remain the Post-office. Now let us talk about something else. Have you been to see a publisher yet? And if not, why not?"

As a matter of fact, I had interviewed a publisher, and a very polite, as well as a very discouraging gentleman I had found him. But that is neither here nor there. It was of infinitely greater importance to me than all the literary fame or profit in the world that my sister should be restrained from committing some rash action, and I could not feel as sure as I should have liked to feel that she would be restrained by Lady Deverell, to whose care I presently had the honor of confiding her. I was puzzled by the old lady's amiability; I could not understand her bland acquiescence in the dismissal of her pet parson, nor was I able to arrive at any comprehension of her motives for showing us so much kindness. A desire on her part to spite Lady Charles hardly seemed to be a sufficient explanation of them.

"Of course you will want to see as much as you can of your sister," she said very graciously, "and we are not far from Berkeley Square, you know. One of the servants will always be available to take her round there, if you would rather she didn't walk through the streets alone."

It seemed unlikely that Nora would wish to pay frequent visits to Berkeley Square, but it was certainly incumbent upon her to pay a speedy visit to Lady Charles Gascoigne, and I suggested that she might do so about half-past five on the following afternoon. "When," I was careful to add, for my sister's benefit, "you may count upon finding Lady Charles at home

and all by herself. That is to say that you will probably find me with her, because I shall make a point of being there ; but Hurstbourne seldom shows his face before the dinner hour."

This was a strictly truthful assertion, though Hurstbourne saw fit to falsify it. I mentioned in the course of the ensuing day that Nora would be coming about tea-time, and I suppose he must have taken note of my words ; for no sooner had she arrived, and been embraced and scolded for her breach of faith with a lady whose earnest wish it had been to have the pleasure of introducing her into the highest circles, than in he walked.

"I have a crow to pluck with you, Miss Nora," he made haste to announce. "I should like to know what you mean by turning your back upon us and going over to the enemy. Your brother won't allow that Lady Deverell is the enemy ; but you aren't such an old humbug as he is, and I'm sure you won't pretend to think that she is a friend of ours. So now perhaps you'll kindly explain yourself."

I was thankful to perceive that Nora's emotions were well under control. She made much the same excuse as I had already made to Lady Charles on her behalf, and did not treat his remonstrances seriously. It may have been painful to her to meet him and talk with him ; but she did not look as though she were in pain, and after a time I felt able to relax my vigilant observation of her words and ways. When we had finished our tea Hurstbourne and she retired into the back drawing-room together, upon I forgot what pretext, while Lady Charles entertained me with a protracted description of a garden-party at which she had

been present and at which she appeared to have met quite a galaxy of celebrities.

"I had a long chat with his Royal Highness," the poor old thing told me, with irrepressible glee, "and he was as simple and natural as possible—just like any ordinary person. He said he couldn't think how it was that he had never met me before. His Grace is a great deal in that set now, you know."

I had not the heart to distress her by saying that his Grace's participation in the diversions of that set was likely to be a brief one. I allowed her to prattle on, and did not contradict her when she declared that a Duke of Hurstbourne possessed almost a prescriptive right to some post connected with the Royal household.

"At present," she remarked, "all the appointments that he could accept are filled up, and the Tories are naturally reluctant to bestow any honor upon the head of one of the historic Whig houses ; but I think they will find, when a vacancy does occur, that his claims are too strong to be resisted."

The head of the historic Whig house presently emerged from his retreat in the back drawing-room to inform us that Miss Martyn said she must be off, and that he proposed to see her home. Miss Martyn, however, declined his proffered escort, and, as it appeared that Lady Deverell's maid was waiting for her in the hall, he had to admit that she stood in need of no additional protection.

"I shall see you again before long, I hope," said he, as he shook hands with Nora at the foot of the stairs ; "meanwhile I'll endeavor to lay your good advice to heart. You won't go very far wrong, though, if you bestow an occasional thought upon mine."

"Yours wasn't much to the point," observed Nora ; "mine was. Good-evening."

It was within the range of my capacities to surmise what he had been counselling her to do and avoid ; but, as I felt somewhat curious to learn the nature of her exhortations to him, I made so bold as to interrogate him upon the subject.

"My dear fellow," he answered, "your sister is almost as wise as you are—which is saying a good deal. She sees what you see and what lots of people who aren't as wise as either of you see too. What she doesn't see, and what I can't explain to her, is that it's too late for me to make a fresh start now. The flag's down, we're all off, and I've got to ride the race out, whether I win or whether I come a howling cropper. I don't say that the stakes were worth entering for ; I daresay they weren't and I daresay I shouldn't go in for them a second time ; but what's the use of talking about that at this time of day ? I must do the best I can ; and I mean beating Paul Gascoigne if it's in any way possible to beat him—I don't mind telling you that much."

"In what way is it possible to beat him ?" I inquired. "Not in politics, not in ostentation, certainly not upon the turf, with which he had nothing to do. Would you call it beating him to bind yourself for life to a woman who will hate you unless you can allow her an exorbitant sum in the shape of pin-money and who, if you would only leave her alone, would make him quite satisfactorily miserable for the rest of his days ?"

Hurstbourne seemed to think this an excellent joke ; for he laughed loud and long. "I never knew such a confirmed woman-hater as you are, Martyn," said he ; "I don't believe you think there is a decent woman in

the world, unless it's your sister. Miss St. George is about as good as they make them—in an ordinary way of speaking. Besides, I haven't asked her to marry me yet; and I don't see why you should take it for granted that she will jump down my throat if I ever do."

I by no means took that for granted; on the contrary, I believed Miss St. George to be far too wide awake to unite her fortunes with those of a man who had hopelessly compromised his own. What I did take for granted was that she would end by marrying Paul Gascoigne; though it seemed likely enough that she would amuse herself with Hurstbourne during the season—perhaps also utilize him as a stalking-horse.

It may be that, as time went on, I should in some degree have modified my ideas respecting her, had I seen her and Hurstbourne together more frequently than I did. Afterwards I heard from many people that her conduct had placed the fact of her being deeply smitten with him almost beyond a doubt, and indeed I suppose that the coldest and most calculating of women is not wholly exempt from the passions of love and jealousy. Miss St. George—so I was subsequently informed—soon became violently jealous of my sister, who of course accompanied her and Lady Deverell to the houses which Hurstbourne was in the habit of frequenting and whose intimacy with the duke was fostered and encouraged in every way by her chaperon. Mr. Gascoigne, meanwhile, was not less violently jealous of his cousin; so that altogether it must have been an amusing little comedy for those who were not personally interested in it to watch. I myself did not watch it, because I was only invited to very

few entertainments and declined most of the few invitations that I did receive. Neither Hurstbourne nor Lady Charles told me much about their social doings, while Nora was only careful to assure me that she was enjoying herself. She was a good deal admired, I heard.

Hurstbourne lost a considerable sum over the Derby: somehow or other, he always managed to lose, and how he managed to pay I hardly knew. As far as I could see, it was only by means of most undesirable and costly devices that we were able to meet the current expenses of two large establishments. But it was useless to remonstrate with him; because he was possessed by the gambler's spirit and clung to the gambler's last forlorn hope of setting himself straight by one brilliant and successful stroke. My poor dear Hurstbourne was and is one of the best fellows in England, and, like so many of the best fellows in England, he was bent upon committing moral suicide. I could not save him, though I was thoroughly ashamed of my inaptitude—if there was any consolation in that.

I need scarcely say that he had made arrangements for being present at every event of the Ascot meetings and if these did not include the hire of a house in the neighborhood of the course, that was only because I resolutely refused to provide him with the necessary funds. However, I could not prevent him from hiring a box, and I gathered that he intended the box to be tenanted not only by his mother but by Lady Deverell and the two charming young ladies whose movements were supposed to be under Lady Deverell's control. It was with no little chagrin that he informed me, one

evening, of the disappointment inflicted upon him by the rigid old chaperon in question.

“She says she don’t approve of racing, and her conscience won’t allow her to take her niece to a race-course,” he grunted. “Did you ever hear such rubbish! I told her she needn’t come unless she liked, because my mother would look after Miss St. George just as well as she could; but she wouldn’t give in. Only she said she wasn’t entitled to dictate to your sister; so I hope Miss Nora will join us. Miss Nora is such a good sportswoman that she’s sure to enjoy herself ever so much more than we poor devils, who can’t always afford to wish for the victory of the best horse, can expect to do. Besides, between you and me, I shouldn’t be sorry to get her out of this hurly-burly for a bit. You choose to shut yourself up, and you don’t see what’s going on; but I tell you I don’t half like the way in which some of these fellows are running after your sister. Old fellows too, a good many of them. And she’s inexperienced; you know, and there’s nobody to give her a hint or a caution, except that worldly-religious dowager—Ah, my dear Martyn, what a dog-hole of a world this is, and what asses we all are to live in the midst of it, when we might have lived outside it and been healthy and happy and jolly!”

I was not much surprised when Nora declined to avail herself of the somewhat inadequate loophole of escape from the fashionable world offered to her by a visit to Ascot. She said that, although she might not be under Lady Deverell’s orders, she was living in Lady Deverell’s house and ought to respect the prejudices of her temporary guardian—which sounded reasonable

enough. Lady Charles went down on the Tuesday, and Friday, and Hurstbourne dragged me with him, *faute de mieux*, on the other days. It was a disastrous business from start to finish, and when the meeting was at an end, he frankly confessed to me that matters were beginning to look devilish serious.

"They began to look devilish serious some time ago," I remarked with a sigh.

"H'm ! I suppose they did ; there's some comfort in that. Well, I may have better luck, and I think I shall, at Sandown, where I'm running a couple of my own horses. If that doesn't come off——but sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Did you see Paul Gascoigne swaggering about in the enclosure on Thursday?"

"No," I answered ; "I didn't know that he was a patron of the turf."

"He a patron of the turf!—rather not ! I suppose he went down partly because he thought it was the proper thing to show himself at Ascot on the Cup Day, and partly because he hoped to witness my discomfiture. He wasn't disappointed there ; but he hasn't bowled me out yet, I can tell him. I wish I knew what he meant by those everlasting insinuations of his that one can't take hold of. I'm pretty sure that he has got hold of some story, true or false, about my father ; but if he holds a trump-card, why doesn't he play it ?"

"Perhaps," I suggested, "he is waiting to see what card you mean to play. My belief is that he won't trouble you if only you won't interfere between him and Miss St. George, and it seems to me that you might oblige him to that extent without any great personal suffering or loss. Would you mind telling me one thing,

Hurstbourne: are you really in love with Miss St. George?"

"My dear old Martyn," answered Hurstbourne, "I don't mind telling you anything in reason, and nothing that you could say to me would make me feel in the least bit huffy with you; but—I put it to you now as a man and a brother—don't you think that *is* rather an impertinent question?"

CHAPTER XVI.

NONE OF MY BUSINESS.

IT is generally accounted a creditable thing in any man that he should be a good loser, and the self-command which enables its possessor to meet disaster with a composed smile is, no doubt, a quality which deserves some admiration ; still I must say that it was not a little provoking to a sober, commonplace person like myself to see my best friend diligently and cheerfully pounding his head against a brick wall. The wall was so evidently harder than his head that it was difficult to understand where the fun of the encounter came in, and I couldn't help saying as much to him.

“It is all very fine,” I remarked, “to refrain from crying when you are hurt; but I really don't see why you should laugh about it.”

“I laugh, my dear boy,” he returned, “because I am not beat yet. When I am, we'll sit down on the floor, side by side, and stuff our fists into our eyes, if that will relieve your overcharged feelings; for the present it won't do either you or me any harm to anticipate a victory at Sandown.”

This was a few days after Ascot. Things had come to such a pass that no victory, at Sandown or elsewhere, was likely to set him upon his legs again; but perhaps,

when a condemned man has started for the scaffold, it is a matter of small consequence whether he exhibits an edifying dejection or disappoints spectators by looking as if he didn't care. As for me, I perceived that my functions must soon come to an end. My daily routine work had ceased to possess any interest for me, now that the saving of a few pounds here and there could not affect the ultimate result one way or the other. I daresay that was why I hurried through it on that particular morning and, for no reason except that I did not know what else to do with myself, strolled off to Hyde Park.

I have always abhorred London, and it has always been incomprehensible to me that people who might be breathing fresh country air should deliberately choose to spend the best part of the summer in that thickly-populated desert of bricks and pavement; but I don't wonder that the poor, deluded creatures should be thankful for such an apology for green leaves and such an imitation of what flower-beds ought to look like as the Park can afford them, and to my mind they look rather better and happier there than they do by candle-light. That is, the men and a few of the women look better; the majority of the latter have, of course, seen fit in these days to adopt a species of complexion which is ill-fitted to cope with the warm glow of a sunny June morning. I was wandering along, taking half-conscious notes of the passers-by as I went, and inwardly wondering who could have been the first extraordinary individual to suggest that mauve is a becoming color to lay thickly upon human cheeks and chins, when I caught sight of Hurstbourne riding with Miss St. George. There was a groom behind them—Lady Deverell's

groom, I presumed, since he did not wear the Gascoigne livery—but they were otherwise unaccompanied and unattended ; which seemed rather imprudent on their part, unless they wanted to be talked about. But very likely one of them did, while the other didn't mind. A man with whom I was slightly acquainted took me by the elbow before I had ceased to gaze at their backs, and said :

“ Does that really mean business ? You ought to know.”

“ Ought I ? ” I answered. “ Well, I don't. It's none of *my* business, anyhow.”

“ Oh, but I thought you were acting as a sort of male nurse to the duke. It's too bad of you if you aren't, for nobody stands in greater need of a nurse than that misguided young man does. To live at the rate of about three times your income is silly enough ; but you may take my word for it that that isn't half so silly as marrying Miss St. George. I know, because my sister was at school with her, and the girl is mother of the woman, as Shakespeare, or some other equally sharp-witted old quilldriver, observes. Miss St. George has no money, precious little brains and a beastly temper. If you have any influence over that unlucky duke of yours, it is your duty to exert it and get him to drop this game, whatever other games that he doesn't understand he may insist upon playing.”

“ I have no influence over him to speak of,” I replied rather crossly, “ and I think Miss St. George has brains enough to refuse a man who is spending three times his income—supposing Hurstbourne to be such a man. Added to which, Miss St. George has a vigilant and competent aunt.”

Then I turned and walked away, not caring to listen to any more remarks of the above description. I walked straight to the house of Miss St. George's aunt ; not because I wanted to see that lady, but because I did rather want to see Nora, to whom I had something to say. The chances were that before the autumn I should find myself free and unemployed ; she also would, I hoped, be similarly situated ; and it seemed to me that the time had nearly come for us to make some arrangement respecting the future.

Miss Martyn was at home, I was told, on reaching Upper Grosvenor Street, and very glad Miss Martyn was to see me. So, at least, she said, though she might have given a more flattering reason for her gladness.

“I was just wondering how I could manage to get a word with you, Phil,” she began. “I want you to tell me whether all these things that people are saying are true. I can’t ask anybody else, because I don’t like to appear inquisitive : besides, I suppose all they could do would be to repeat hearsay. But *you* must know whether it is a fact or not that he has lost such enormous sums of late.”

I did not think it worth while to waste time and breath by inquiring who “he” might be. “It is a fact,” I replied, “that he lost a good deal of money at Ascot. I can’t tell you how much, and I don’t know that it particularly signifies. It is just wildly possible that before the end of the racing season he may recoup himself for his losses ; but I have given up all hope that he will ever consent to square his expenditure with his revenue ; so, since the break-down must inevitably occur sooner or later, it may as well come in

a few months as next year or the year after. For several reasons, in fact, the sooner it comes the better I shall be pleased. The sooner it comes the more likelihood there will be of our saving enough out of the wreck for him to live upon ; though not enough, I trust, to tempt Miss St. George, with whom I saw him riding in Rotten Row just now."

Nora looked very grave at this. "Was he riding with her ?" she asked. "If Lady Deverell hears of that, she will be furious. As it was, there was very nearly a quarrel at breakfast time because Miss St. George insisted upon going out with the groom, and it did seem odd that she should be so determined to do what she had never cared to do before. They must have been seen together, of course."

"Oh, they must have been seen together," I agreed. "They must have been seen by several hundreds, not to say thousands, of persons besides your humble servant. But that is rather more Miss St. George's look-out than yours or mine, isn't it ?"

Nora made no immediate reply. She had received me in a small room—so small that it ought, perhaps, rather to be described as a recess of the drawing-room, from which it was separated by looped-up curtains and by one of those perforated cedar-wood screens where-with the army of occupation in Egypt has flooded the abodes of its friends at home. While we were talking, she had been arranging cut flowers in a multitude of bowls and specimen-glasses, in preparation, I suppose, for a dinner-party, and she silently pursued this employment for some time before she said :

"I am afraid you will think I am jealous of Miss St. George, Phil, but you will be mistaken if you do think

so. I have quite got over my—my trouble now, and it isn't on that account—of course it *couldn't* be!—that I wish we could save him from her."

"She will save him and herself at one and the same time," I answered. "It will be a case of *sauve qui peut* before long, and unless I am very much mistaken in the young lady, she won't be slow to join the general flight."

"You say that," observed Nora, "because you neither understand her nor—nor the whole position of affairs. I don't believe she cared a bit for him when she was at Lavenham; she may have thought there was no harm in having a second string to her bow, or perhaps she may have been flattered by his admiration. But I am certain that she does care for him now; and it is almost entirely owing to Lady Deverell's mismanagement that she does."

"If she cares for him enough to marry him upon a mere pittance, she is entitled to our respectful sympathy," said I; "but I venture to doubt whether her aunt will be guilty of such gross mismanagement as to let her incur a sacrifice of that heroic description."

"I am afraid she is foolish enough to marry him," answered Nora; "I am sure she doesn't care for him enough to put up with any privations for his sake; and—she isn't at all afraid of her aunt. You won't understand unless I tell you all about it, and even when I have told you, the chances are that you won't believe the truth. However, here it is for you in all its nakedness. Lady Deverell, of course, has wanted all along to make up a match between her niece and Mr. Gascoigne; that much you must have seen for yourself. After a time she became alarmed by the duke's atten-

tions ; so she sent for me. Perhaps you didn't trace any connection between cause and effect there."

I confessed that I had failed to do so, and Nora went on :

" So did I until the scheme was made too apparent to mislead an infant. The duke was supposed to have been more or less captivated by my charms down in the country—such a thing wasn't impossible, although, as you know, it didn't actually occur—and it was hoped that my sudden appearance in London would produce a certain effect upon him. The queer part of the business is that, instead of having produced that effect upon him, it has produced a rather startling effect upon somebody else. Naturally he has talked and danced a good deal with me—we were always good friends, you know—and the consequence has been that his flirtation with Miss St. George has become a serious love-affair. It was serious on his side from the first, I suppose, and now it is serious on hers. If, as you say, and as everybody says, he is upon the brink of ruin, his friends ought to do all they can to prevent him from making ruin more ruinous than there is any need for it to be by sharing it with Miss St. George. Don't you think so ? "

" Upon my word, I don't know," I replied rather snappishly. " Hurstbourne isn't the only person in the world who interests me, and, as I told you before, I have great confidence in Miss St. George's distaste for heroic sacrifices. I may be wrong ; but what strikes me most forcibly in all this is that I have some little right to resent your having been made a cat's-paw of. Do you yourself feel no sort of resentment, may I ask ? "

" That isn't the question," said Nora. " Well, since

you ask me, I may as well admit that I do. The position is not a very dignified or a very agreeable one, and I haven't yet told you the worst of it—the worst, I mean, so far as I am concerned. All's fair in love and in war, and I don't very much wonder that when the duke saw, as he couldn't help seeing, how things were, he should have taken advantage of his opportunities. He might have remembered that some trifle of consideration was due to me; but then, to be sure, he wasn't aware of my susceptibility. To speak plainly, he has chosen to enrage Miss St. George of late by a rather conspicuous pretence of devotion to me. Well, it suited his purpose to make believe, and I forgive him, though I can't say that my personal affection for him has been exactly increased by his conduct. Still I like him well enough to wish to do him a good turn if I can, and that is why I was anxious to hold a consultation with you."

"I also was anxious to hold a consultation with you," I answered; "but not about Hurstbourne. Let him go to the—well, let us say to the dogs, since he seems to have set his heart upon arriving at that destination. I have done all I could for him; it is high time that I began trying to do something for my sister. And a man who has used my sister as he has used you, really mustn't expect me to care particularly whether he and Miss St. George and the whole lot of them together go to the dogs or not."

"Nevertheless, you do care," remarked Nora quietly.

"Very well; I do care, if you will have it so. But I care a great deal more for you than I do for him; and there is nothing discreditable in that statement, I hope."

Then I proceeded to unfold my plans. I said I had resolved to resign my present post and that, even if I

wished to retain it, I should not be able to do so much longer, because Hurstbourne's affairs must soon be placed in the hands of trustees. I proposed to take a small house somewhere on the outskirts of London, while looking about for some fresh field in which to employ my energies, and I added that Nora would have to make her home with me until she married. I went on to state that I did not ask her consent to this arrangement, seeing that I held myself justified in issuing commands upon the point, and she seemed to be much amused by the peremptory tone in which I informed her that I should permit no matrimonial alliance on her part, save one of affection.

“Poor old Phil!” she said; “how do you suppose that you can prevent me from accepting the first benevolent old gentleman who asks me? Two of them have already honored me by offers. I seem destined to captivate elderly admirers.”

“But you have refused them?” I said apprehensively.

“Oh, yes; I have refused them both—more shame for me! Nothing is so immoral or so deteriorating as to make resolutions and then break them for want of a pinch of courage. But never mind me just now; my prospects can be discussed any day during the next two or three months, and so can yours. We have no time to lose, though, if we want to preserve the duke from——”

Her sentence was interrupted by the abrupt throwing open of the drawing-room door and the entrance of two persons who were apparently in the midst of a heated altercation. Through the apertures of the carved screen I could see Miss St. George in her riding-habit and the

angry face of Lady Deverell ; but neither of the ladies saw me : otherwise I am sure that the elder would not have said, in a loud, clear voice :

“ It is nonsense to pretend that you have not deceived me, Leila, because you now admit having met him. If you had told me before you started that you were going out on purpose to meet him, you might claim to have behaved honestly.”

“ Only then you wouldn’t have let me go,” Miss St. George observed.

“ Most certainly I should not. Good gracious, Leila, can’t you understand that you are making yourself perfectly ridiculous, besides endangering your chance of marrying really well? I can assure you that you will never marry the Duke of Hurstbourne, because I shall take measures to prevent that, if you drive me to employ them ; but my firm belief is that he won’t propose to you. Are you so blind as not to see that he has lost his heart to poor little Nora Martyn ? I don’t say that he will make a duchess of her—that would be too absurd ; although the poor child may be silly enough to fancy that he will.”

I confess that I should have been in honor bound to sneeze before that, if I could have managed it ; but it takes a few moments to get up a thoroughly natural and effective sneeze. Under cover of the tremendous hullabaloo which I presently succeeded in raising Nora made good her escape, while I stepped smilingly forth from my ambush to face the disconcerted ladies. They must have felt disconcerted, and one of them looked so ; the other, I am forced by the veracity incumbent upon a conscientious historian to admit, did not. Miss St. George had one of her usual vague nods at my ser-

vice and, as usual, gave me to understand that my value in her estimation, whether as a visitor or as an eaves-dropper, amounted exactly to Zero.

"If you haven't anything more to say just at present, I'll go upstairs and change," she remarked to her aunt, and so left me to receive Lady Deverell's apologies, of which I was not defrauded.

Lady Deverell was ashamed of herself, and admitted as much with a candor which disarmed attack. "People have no business to hide behind screens, and listeners hear no good of themselves," she continued; "but I am very sorry that you overheard what I said just now. Nevertheless, it was the truth, you know."

"The truth that Hurstbourne has lost his heart to Nora, but that it would be too absurd to credit him with any intention of marrying her?" I asked.

"Oh, well, of course I shouldn't have used those words in speaking to you; but if you are not aware of the facts, you really ought to have been aware of them."

"Such is my density," I replied, "that what you call facts have remained and still remain, unacknowledged by me. Supposing them to be facts, they make you out a trustworthy sort of chaperon, don't they?"

Lady Deverell sat down and began to defend herself against accusations which I had not made.

"It is all very well to abuse me," said she; "but I have done the best I could, and it happens to be my duty to take care of my niece as well as your sister. I don't see that I am to blame for having taken a little advantage of that young man's infatuation. If Nora had taken a fancy to him, it might have been different; but she hasn't."

"How do you know that?" I inquired.

"I have eyes and ears; I have seen her with him and heard a good deal of what she has said to him. Like other girls, she thinks it a fine thing to have captivated a duke; but I really don't believe that she would marry him, even if he were to propose to her. It is only fair to Nora to say that I have always recognized her keen sense of right and wrong."

"I wish," I remarked, "that yours were equally keen. It is only fair to myself to say that I consider you a most immoral old lady."

"Very well," returned Lady Deverell, with a short laugh; "under the circumstances, you are entitled to be rude, and we won't quarrel over it. I know you don't like me, and, frankly speaking, I don't much like you; still I am not quite so bad as you suppose. I wouldn't place Nora's happiness in jeopardy even for the sake of that tiresome and perverse girl Leila; I have profited by the course of events, that is all."

I had never liked Lady Deverell so well as I did at that moment. She was really an immoral old lady; but her fighting instincts were those of the good old race to which she belonged, and if she could only have made up her mind to cast aside all affectation of being religious she probably would not have been a worse member of the community than other dowagers. We concluded a sort of armed truce, and she begged me not to make mischief by repeating to Nora a fragment of conversation which had never been intended to reach my ears. I thought it unnecessary to mention that the screen which had concealed me at the time had likewise concealed my sister.

I was walking down St. James's Street, on my way

to lunch at the club, when I encountered Hurstbourne, who stopped me in order to say excitedly: "Look here, old chap; I'll give you a real good tip for once. Back Mock Turtle for all you're worth. He can't lose, and I can get you 2 to 1 even now."

I shook my head and declined the tempting offer. I know very little about racing; but I was dimly aware that Mock Turtle was one of the horses that Hurstbourne had bought with their engagements and that the animal was entered for some race or other in the forthcoming Sandown meeting.

"Have *you* backed him for all you're worth?" I asked.

"That wouldn't be much, would it?" he laughed. "I've backed him pretty heavily, though, and I've backed The Crocodile too for the other event—which isn't an absolute certainty, I confess." He paused for a moment, tapping his boot with his cane and gazing down the street. "By the way," he resumed, "you're coming with us to old Mother Deverell's hop next Thursday, aren't you?"

"I shouldn't think I was," I answered; "as far as I know, I haven't been invited."

"Of course you have been invited, and of course you'll have to come. These two blessed races will be over by then, and I shall know better how I stand than I do now."

I don't know whether he meant me to infer that, if Mock Turtle won, he would take that opportunity of proposing to Miss St. George. He looked as if he wouldn't mind being questioned—which, I daresay, was why I abstained from questioning him. I was out of all patience with him, and that is the truth.

Perhaps I was out of patience with Nora and with Lady Deverell and with myself to boot. There are moments when the ridiculous and uncalled-for contrariety of things is too much for the patience even of a man who is at once prosaic and a poet.

CHAPTER XVII.

HURSTBOURNE HAS MANY WARNINGS.

I HAD the effrontery to call myself a poet in the last paragraph of the last chapter, and I don't know that my presumption was any the more excusable because I qualified it by the statement that I was a prosaic poet. I hasten to substitute the assertion that I am—or at least once was—a prosaic rhymester, which is a more intelligible definition than the other. What, I have sometimes wondered, are the constituent qualities of a true poet? I am not going to admit that facility of expression is one of them, because that may be acquired, readily in some cases, slowly and painfully in others, by everybody, just as everybody may learn to play the piano after a fashion. But I suppose that one essential attribute of the true poet is a certain insight into the byways of human nature which can never be learnt by the majority of his fellow-creatures, though many of them may be quite as well able as he to distinguish black from white and A from B. Had I been gifted with as much of that faculty as was required for reading the not very recondite thoughts of such persons as Nora and Hurstbourne and Lady Deverell and Miss St. George, I should doubtless have felt less perturbed about them all than I did; but the more I reflected

the more uncertain I became as to what they would be at, and this naturally rendered me down-hearted, as well as a trifle cross. Moreover, the control of events seemed to have been absolutely removed from my hands ; so that, like a weary play-goer, I was chiefly anxious to reach a foregone conclusion, to see the curtain fall and have done with it.

The fall of the curtain was not unlikely to take place at Sandown ; but I declined to accompany Hurstbourne thither, pleading as an excuse that I was not a member of the club and that I preferred, for choice, to escape the contumely with which outsiders are treated on that exclusive pleasure-ground. Lady Charles also, for once, decided to remain at home. It was a very hot day, and she was tired, she said. She certainly looked so. Probably it had at length dawned upon her that her son had made a most stupendous fool of himself, and, for all I know, she may have begun to realize that she herself had been in a large measure to blame for his folly. It did not really signify, because the milk was spilt, and there was no more use in crying over it than there was in snapping at me. She did snap at me when we met at the luncheon hour—it was not often that she behaved in that way, poor, good-natured soul ! —and I will not deny that I snapped back at her. If our nerves were on edge, and if we both expected to hear of a catastrophe before dinner-time, we had no great cause to feel penitent or to ask pardon of one another.

However, that good Lady Charles's conscience must have been tenderer than mine ; for about six o'clock she sent to beg that I would come downstairs and have a cup of tea with her, and when I appeared, in obedi-

ence to her request, she apologized, a little awkwardly yet quite sufficiently, for having been rude to me earlier in the day.

“To tell you the truth, Mr. Martyn,” said she, “I am not happy about his Grace. I am afraid he is spending more money than he ought.”

“There is no doubt about that,” I replied; “I have been warning him that he was doing so for a long time past; but I can’t do more than warn him. I wish it had occurred to you to do as much a little sooner.”

She sighed and remarked, with a queer mixture of regret and complacency, that I perhaps didn’t understand the hereditary tendency of the family. “The Gascoignes,” said she, “have been generous and open-handed from time immemorial. His father was just the same, and so, I must say was the late duke; although ——But, at all events, such is the family disposition, and it isn’t a disposition to be ashamed of, after all.”

“It is a disposition which requires to be supported by large revenues,” I observed. “Mr. Paul Gascoigne appears to have obtained the revenues and escaped the generic taint.”

“Well, you wouldn’t wish Arthur to resemble him, I should hope!”

“No—except in respect of income. But as you and Hurstbourne are agreed in despising him, why are you so desperately bent upon rivalling him? I believe two-thirds, if not the whole, of these embarrassments are due to your insane attempt to pit a poor man against a rich one on the very field where the rich man is sure of ultimate victory.”

“Not at all!” returned Lady Charles, with some animation. “Fight him we must, and Arthur is quite

right to fight him; but it isn't only by spending as much money as he does that we hope to show him that he is not invincible."

"The common household flea," I ventured to remark, "is not invincible; yet one doesn't expend one's life and one's fortune and any little intelligence that one may possess in stooping to conquer him. A simpler and better plan is to avoid his haunts."

I should doubtless have proceeded to the utterance of further indiscretions had not my oration been cut short by the entrance of Hurstbourne, who bounced into the room, with a radiant countenance and a pair of field-glasses slung over his shoulder, to announce that Mock Turtle had proved worthy of the confidence reposed in him by his backers.

"It looked like a near thing," he told us, "but the horse really won as he chose, and I believe the poor old Crocodile would have about won his race too, if he hadn't been a bit unlucky. Well, one mustn't be greedy; it's something to have pulled off the big event isn't it?"

He was so elated that I had not the cruelty to inquire what might be the exact pecuniary result of having pulled off the big event, nor did he volunteer any more mercenary details for our benefit. The nearest approach that he made to a statement bearing upon that point was when he remarked exultingly :

"This will be a rare sell for Paul Gascoigne! He was going about all over the place yesterday, telling people that I was broke, and pretending to be deeply afflicted. He'd be afflicted without any pretence if he knew how many thousands more to the good I am this evening than I was when he spoke."

So we gave ourselves up to triumph and mutual con-

gratulation, and it was not until next morning that I took leave to beg for more specific information. It then appeared that Hurstbourne really had won a rather large sum of money in bets ; the stakes did not seem to have been worth very much. Whether his success was a thing to rejoice over or not depended entirely upon the view that he might take and the use that he might make of it. It would be of no sort of service to him or anybody else if it only enabled him to go on living in the same way for a few more months ; and this was what I strove to impress upon him while we were driving together in a hansom towards the city, where we had some business to transact with his lawyers.

“ Well, hang it all, Martyn ! ” he exclaimed reproachfully, “ it’s better to have won than to have lost ; you’ll allow that surely ! What a dogged old wet blanket you are ! ”

“ I shouldn’t always be a wet blanket if the chimney wasn’t always on fire,” I returned ; “ it’s worth while to maintain that unpleasant character if I can prevent the house from being burnt down.”

“ Ah, but can you ? Why not be jolly until the conflagration sets in ? It’s bound to come, I expect, and we’re prepared for it—my mother and I. I daresay we shall manage to make ourselves tolerably comfortable among the ashes ; it won’t be an altogether novel experience to us, you see. Anyhow, we can’t be prudent and penurious until we’re forced to be so. We aren’t made that way.”

“ There is no accounting for tastes,” I sighed, “ and if it were only a question of you and your mother——”

He understood my delicate allusion, for he laughed and declared that it wasn’t yet a question of anybody

else. To be sure, it *might* be because there was such a thing as disinterested affection, although of course a fellow whose mind was so warped by unreasoning hatred of women as mine was wouldn't believe it. He did not, he made haste to add, flatter himself that he had inspired any woman with sentiments of disinterested affection.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," I responded dryly. "Such an illusion as that would be liable to be rudely dispelled from one moment to another."

The idea of Miss St. George manifesting disinterested affection by taking up her abode upon a cinder-heap with the man of her choice was really a little bit too comic.

Our conference with the lawyers had a somewhat sobering effect upon Hurstbourne, who, I take it, did not want to be reduced to downright poverty, and who, notwithstanding his brave words, probably did not believe altogether in the imminence of such a melancholy event. We agreed to walk home, and, as we paced along the Embankment, I talked to him with a seriousness which he professed himself able to appreciate.

"Only, you know," said he, "I can't begin cutting things down to-morrow. Let's get to the end of the season, and then we'll see. I suppose you won't understand what I mean; but it's a sort of point of honor with me not to cave in to Paul Gascoigne."

I confessed my utter inability to understand what Mr. Gascoigne had to do with his cousin's annual expenditure; whereupon Hurstbourne burst out laughing and declared that it wasn't a bit of good to argue with a man who was so beastly literal. Doubtless he

was right. Nothing could be gained by argument when the real premises were not before us, and I could only hope that Miss St. George, who was far more competent to undertake the task than I, would ere long convince him of the vanity of his ambitions.

By the time that we had reached Whitehall we had abandoned the subject of finance. We were progressing along that thoroughfare, keeping up a desultory conversation upon topics of general interest, when whom should we encounter but the very insufficient fount and origin of all our woes. Mr. Gascoigne was evidently on his way towards Westminster, and looked the earnest legislator all over, with his unbuttoned frock-coat and his neat umbrella, which he carried over his shoulder, in imitation of a distinguished statesman with whose policy he seldom finds himself in accord. Nothing, I should think, can possibly prevent Mr. Gascoigne from becoming Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster some day. He was in plenty of time; and that, no doubt, was why he condescended to pull up and shake hands with us both.

“Well, Arthur,” said he, “you were lucky, for once, at Sandown yesterday I am glad to hear.”

“I won one race and lost another; I didn’t do badly on the day,” answered Hurstbourne. “I don’t know why you should be glad to hear of it, though.”

“I am always glad to hear of your having been successful,” was Mr. Gascoigne’s bland rejoinder. “I only wish you gave me more frequent occasions for rejoicing on that score.”

“Oh, I’ll make you rejoice once or twice yet before I die,” retorted Hurstbourne grimly. Hurstbourne is as pretty a fighter as anybody could wish to see; but

he requires the *fleuret de combat*, he doesn't excite admiration when the buttons are on the foils.

My eyes were upon Paul Gascoigne's face, and for one instant I saw him look very nasty indeed ; but he knew how to control himself, and it was in his customary tone of composed affability that he said : " You are going to Lady Deverell's ball to-night, I suppose ? "

" Yes, I am," replied Hurstbourne curtly. " Are you ? "

" I hope so. I may be detained rather late in the House ; but I shall try to put in an appearance during the course of the evening. Lady Deverell and Miss St. George kindly made such a point of my being there that I mustn't break faith with them."

Hurstbourne hailed a passing hansom and jumped into it. Unlike his cousin, he had little or no self-control, and I think he often ran away, as it were, from his temper, fearing lest it might lead him into doing or saying something that he might afterwards regret.

" Are you coming home, Martyn ? " he called out.

" Not just yet," I answered ; " I have one or two things to do first."

I really had one or two things to do ; but it was not so much on that account that I allowed him to drive away alone as because I knew by a sort of intuition that Mr. Gascoigne wanted to speak to me. So strong was that impression on my part that, as soon as I was left upon the pavement with the recently elected M.P., I said somewhat abruptly : " Well, what is it ? "

He smiled and remarked : " You are really very quick, Mr. Martyn ; yes ; it is quite true that I am glad to have this opportunity of saying a few words to you

about Arthur. It would be idle to blink at the fact that he and I are—simply and solely through his choice—in the position of antagonists, and I daresay I may assume that you are on his side in an antagonism which I am unaware of having done anything to provoke. It is just because you are on his side, because you are a friend of his and because you are believed to have influence over him, that I am anxious to convey a hint to him through you to which he certainly would not listen if it were to come directly from me. I am not, believe me, malicious ; I have no desire to injure him ; but I believe that I have it in my power to injure him somewhat seriously, and circumstances may arise which will leave me no option but to exercise that power. To speak quite candidly, I allude to his attentions to Miss St. George. For reasons upon which I need not enter, those attentions are as disagreeable to me as they are to the young lady's aunt ; and they really must be discontinued. If they are not, I fear that I shall be driven, much against my will, to have recourse to the measures at which I have hinted."

"I don't call that speaking quite candidly," I replied. "One would like to have something more definite than a hint before taking upon oneself to meddle with other people's affairs."

"Quite so ; but it will be obvious to you that I cannot be more explicit without betraying what I trust may remain a family secret. Arthur, I have no doubt, has told you of a conversation which I had with him at Lavenham ; I must leave you to draw your own conclusions as to the nature of the secret in question."

"I understand, then," said I, "that your threat is this : your cousin is to stop flirting with Miss St.

George or else you will circulate some scandalous story, true or false, about his father ; and although you failed to frighten him by that threat, you think I may do so. I am obliged to you for your considerate suggestion ; but I am not going to take advantage of it ; and I will tell you why. I don't believe you can prove anything ; had you been able to do so, you would have come forward with your proofs long before this."

" Do you imagine, Mr. Martyn," asked Mr. Gascoigne gravely, " that the credit of the family name counts for nothing with me ? "

" It can't count for much," I rejoined, " since you propose to sacrifice it unless you are gratified by a surrender which certainly will not be made. I couldn't ask Hurstbourne to make that surrender even if I believed in your power to throw discredit upon anybody except yourself. But I don't. Good-morning."

I marched off with my head in the air and with perfect consciousness of having made a foe. It did not, however, seem likely that Mr. Gascoigne would ever be able to do me much harm, while he would assuredly do Hurstbourne all the harm that he could, whether his conditions were complied with or not. Therefore I did not think that I had been guilty of a diplomatic error by dealing with him in that high and mighty fashion ; nor did I deem it advisable to report a menace to which I was disposed to attach very little importance.

Both Hurstbourne and Lady Charles were dining out that evening and had, I believe, other engagements as well ; so that I did not go with them to Lady Devonell's ball. It was close upon midnight when I arrived in Upper Grosvenor Street ; for I had not hurried

myself, knowing that my personal participation in the revels would be of that passive kind which soon palls upon the participator. The street was blocked with carriages and the house with guests, insomuch that it took me a good ten minutes to reach the landing at the top of the stairs, the nose of my hostess, *late ruful-gens*, serving me as a beacon towards which to shape my course. I gathered that she must have been blowing it more than usual, and consequently that she must be more than usually out of temper, which indeed, I found to be the case as soon as I joined her.

“ Oh, how do you do ? ” she said in an acrimonious tone. “ Your sister has been inquiring for you ; she thought you weren’t coming. The Duke of Hurstbourne has been here for ever so long. He seems bent upon making a night of it.”

I edged my way on towards the ballroom without stopping to ask her to explain herself. I know what women are when their tempers have been upset ; they are just like certain breeds of dogs, who, the moment that they have become excited, must needs bite somebody and would as soon bite their best friend as anybody else. Hurstbourne, I presumed from Lady Deverell’s remarks, was making fierce love to Miss St. George somewhere or other ; but I really couldn’t help it if he was. The utmost that I could do was to see for myself what he was about, and then endeavor to restrain the noble ire of Mr. Paul Gascoigne, supposing that gentleman to be present. However, it was some little time before I could see anything, except the backs and heads of persons immediately in front of me. It was all very well for Lady Charles Gascoigne to assert that Lady Deverell knew nobody, and

possibly she did not know the smartest of the smart ; but she had contrived to get together an enormous number of people, amongst whom I recognized (from having had the privilege of gazing at their photographs in the shop-windows) quite a respectable sprinkling of notabilities. Her ball was very well done too ; the flowers alone must have cost her as much money as would have provided me with the necessaries of life for six months.

While I was making my little observations the music ceased, and presently Nora, in the wake of other couples, passed close beside me. She at once disengaged herself from the arm of her cavalier to take possession of mine, whispering : "Let us get out of this for a minute, Phil ; I want to speak to you."

After we had extricated ourselves with a struggle from the surging throng, I led her, or rather she led me, to the extreme top of the staircase, where we seated ourselves upon the floor, in accordance with what, I am given to understand, is the custom, and having indeed nothing else to sit upon.

"Well," she began somewhat impatiently, "have you done anything?"

"Done anything?" I repeated. "No ; I haven't done anything particular that I am aware of. I haven't warned Hurstbourne off from the neighborhood of Miss St. George, if that is what you mean. I don't much believe in the danger ; but if I did believe in it, the very last thing that I should do would be to wave a danger-flag before his eyes."

"The danger is real, Phil, whether you believe in it or not. He has been dancing with her the whole evening. I don't exactly know what you mean by waving

danger-flags ; but I should have thought you might at least have told him what you and I overheard the other day. That, surely, would have opened his eyes."

"To what, my dear ? To the agreeable circumstance that Lady Deverell and Miss St. George had noticed the very thing that he was anxious to force upon their notice, and that you had played the part which he was graciously pleased to assign to you to perfection ? "

"No ; only perhaps to the fact that he has treated me as no gentleman ought to treat a friend."

"Ah, that is another matter," I said. "If you wanted me to mention that to him, you should have said so, and I'm not sure that I shouldn't have obeyed your instructions. But I understood that you regarded him and his flirtations with absolute indifference."

"That only means that you are vexed with me, as well as with him, and that you won't stir a finger to help either of us. I thought you were a better friend than that, Phil."

"I am a friend like another," I replied rather crossly (for I suppose the truth was that she had drawn a fairly accurate sketch of my mental condition) ; "only it seems to me that friendship implies some sort of reciprocity. I have told Hurstbourne over and over again that he will be an ass to propose to Miss St. George : what more can I do ? If you think I should prove my friendship for you or for him by telling him that, in your opinion and mine, he has behaved very like a cad to you, I am willing to go that length. It will be a little bit humiliating to have to do it, though."

"I daresay it would—and I daresay it wouldn't answer our purpose either," agreed Nora, getting up. "All I know is that I, personally, have submitted to as

much humiliation as I can bear ; he has reached the end of my patience. I shouldn't so much have minded his dancing with me and sitting out dances with me and all that, if he hadn't thought it necessary to play the whole comedy. It wasn't necessary. He might just as well have talked about hunting or about anything else that would have given us the appearance of being deeply interested in one another ; but, instead of that, he must needs say things which—well, I am not going to let him speak to me again as he spoke this evening, even to keep him out of the reach of Miss St. George's clutches."

This was pleasant hearing for an already irate brother. I was about to demand a fuller explanation when Hurstbourne himself ran breathlessly up the last flight of stairs to join us.

"So there you are, Miss Nora!" he exclaimed ; "I hope you feel ashamed of yourself. You can't have forgotten that you promised me the dance which is just over."

"Is it over?" she returned. "Then I may as well sit down again." And she suited the action to the word. "Phil and I are enjoying ourselves together," she added ; "we mustn't keep you in this remote spot, or you won't be able to find your partner for the next dance."

He stared at her with a comical mixture of surprise and penitence. "What have I done?" he asked. "Why am I to be first thrown over and then kicked downstairs?"

One often laughs when one is not feeling particularly merry. His phrase brought to my memory a familiar quotation the first words of which struck me as so pain-

fully, ludicrously appropriate that I burst into one of those abrupt guffaws for which I have all my life enjoyed an unenviable celebrity. By the time that I had composed myself Hurstbourne was half-way down towards the landing, looking extremely huffy, while Nora's pale cheeks were suffused with the rosy hue of wrath. The uproar of my own hilarity had prevented me from hearing what passed between them; but no doubt she had given him the recollection of a waspish speech to take away with him.

She left my side almost immediately afterwards, a partner having come up to claim her, and during the rest of the evening I saw her only from a distance. From a distance also I surveyed the other actors in the little drama with which I was concerned—Miss St. George, who looked superbly handsome and triumphant, Hurstbourne, who seemed to be in one of his reckless moods, and the future Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, at whose elbow black Care had evidently stationed herself. By watching the pantomime which unfolded itself at intervals before me I could form a pretty shrewd conjecture at what they were all doing and saying; sometimes they were together, sometimes one of them (Paul Gascoigne) was left out in the cold; once I fancied that there was a sort of incipient alteration between him and Hurstbourne; but it came to nothing, and shortly after two o'clock the politician went away—beaten out of the field, I assumed. I hardly know why I myself lingered on until sunrise. Perhaps I wanted to walk home with Hurstbourne, (Lady Charles had long since departed), and to hear the worst from his lips. Anyhow, I did wait for him; and one result of my having done so was that I was

present when he at last took leave of his hostess. He congratulated her upon the success of her ball, and said it had been "awfully jolly."

"I am glad you have enjoyed yourself," she returned, glaring at him, "because you will never enjoy yourself in this house again, nor will you ever dance with Leila again. I cautioned you at supper-time that I wouldn't have it; but, for reasons best known to yourself, you have chosen to defy me. So much the worse for you. You don't understand; but you will before this time to-morrow. Don't blame me, that's all; I gave you fair warning, remember."

"What can she have meant?" I asked Hurstbourne, as we left the house.

"I really don't know, and I really don't care," he answered, laughing and lighting a cigar; "I suppose she meant that she was in a devil of a rage."

After all, I might as well have gone to bed some hours earlier; for he gave me no chance of interrogating him. He belonged to one of those clubs which are kept open all night, and thither he now saw fit to betake himself, remarking that it was too late or too early for respectable people to be seen entering their homes. Probably he did not wish to be interrogated.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ASSAULT AND BATTERY.

ONE does not pretend—at least I don't pretend—to solve all the enigmas which are forever cropping up before one, as one wends one's straightforward way through the intricacies of a complicated world. Some of them are not worth solving ; others demand a sacrifice of time and ingenuity which cannot be bestowed upon them ; all things considered, it is best, as a general rule, to wait for the development of events. So, although I do not deny that my curiosity had been stimulated by several of the episodes which had marked Lady Deverell's ball, I made no effort to allay it, knowing very well that I should hear all I wanted to hear before I was much older.

As a matter of fact, I had to wait no longer than until the ensuing afternoon, when Hurstbourne entered my little writing-room, carrying a letter in his hand, which he said he wished me to read.

“It was brought to me half an hour ago,” he explained. “I shouldn't wonder if the whole thing was an infernal lie ; but whether it's a lie, or whether it's true, it must be looked into. Just read what the fellow says, and give me your opinion about it, will you ?”

"The fellow, I presume," said I, as I took the document handed to me, "is Mr. Gascoigne."

Hurstbourne nodded. He looked very savage and very cool. He is one of those favored mortals who grow cool when they are really angry. "I won't express my opinion or my intentions yet," he remarked. "Read his letter and judge for yourself what you would do in my place."

The letter, which bore signs of being a painstaking composition, ran as follows :

"**MY DEAR COUSIN :—**

"It would, I fear, be an almost hopeless task to convince you that, in adopting the course which I feel constrained to adopt, I am actuated by no sentiments of personal unfriendliness towards you. You have persistently, though erroneously, credited me with such sentiments, and I am not sanguine enough to expect that this communication will be attributed by you to any other motive. Nevertheless, you will probably understand that I should not, if I could see my way to avoid it, act in such a manner as to cast a slur upon the family to which we both belong. Having premised that much, I will state my case in as few words as possible.

"You have not, I am sure, forgotten a conversation which took place between us at Lavenham upon the subject of the late Lord Charles Gascoigne. Like the rest of the world, you must have surmised that my uncle would not for so many years have refused to recognize his brother without good and sufficient reasons, and that those reasons, if divulged, would in all likelihood prove less creditable to Lord Charles

than to the duke. From information which had come to my ears at the time, I was inclined to take that view, but I was not then, as I am now, in possession of irrefragable proofs wherewith to support it. Consequently, when you assumed an indignant attitude (for which, I assure you, I did not hold you in the least to blame), I felt that I was in honor bound to withdraw what you stigmatized as offensive insinuations. I am otherwise situated to-day, since I have before me a document, written and signed by my late Uncle Charles, which places my suspicions beyond all reach of contradiction. I am unwilling to cause you any unnecessary pain ; still when a fact has to be stated, it is perhaps less cruel to state it without ambiguity than to beat about the bush. In plain words, then, your father was a forger. He forged his brother's name to a check for a considerable amount ; he was detected and he was pardoned. That is to say that the duke pardoned him in so far as to pay the money and to make him an annual allowance until his marriage with a lady of large private means rendered an allowance superfluous. He declined, however, to see or speak to him again, and, as you are aware, he did not choose to run the risk of nominating a forger's son as his heir. The late duke was a singularly just and clear-headed man. He was also, in my poor judgment, singularly generous. The promise of secrecy which he gave to his brother was never violated by him, I am persuaded, either in word or in implication.

“ You may ask why, under these circumstances, I should write to you with the evident idea of breaking an engagement which I may be said to have in some sort inherited. The question is a reasonable one, and

I will at once give my answer; although you will probably have anticipated it. Certainly I do not wish the world to be informed that an uncle of mine was an unconvicted felon, and certainly I shall withhold that information if it be in my power to do so. But I have not only myself to consider in this matter. Without going into motives to which, I fear, you would attach scant credence, I am, I think, entitled at least to say that a lady for whom I entertain a high regard must not be permitted to accept in ignorance the hand of a man of your parentage. Such, at any rate, is the light in which my duty presents itself to me. Desist from your attentions to Miss St. George, and your secret shall be safe; continue them, and I shall be compelled to speak out. Believe me, I sympathize with you in your dilemma, which has not been of my creating; but pray believe me also when I assure you that my determination is unalterable.

“I have only to add that, should you be disinclined to accept my word for the facts, I will willingly show you the letter to which I have referred, and that I shall remain at home during the whole of this afternoon in case of your desiring to see me.

“I am, my dear cousin,

“Very faithfully yours,

“PAUL GASCOIGNE.”

“Well,” said Hurstbourne, when I folded up this gracefully-worded epistle and restored it to him, “what do you think of that?”

“What could anybody think?” I returned, sorrowfully. “The man must have his proofs, or he never would have dared to write in that way. I don’t know

why the sins of the fathers should be visited upon the children ; it seems to me a most unjust and abominable law ; but I suppose it is one of the laws by which the course of this world has always been governed. You will have to give in, my poor fellow. After all, I can't bring myself to call the terms of surrender hard, and depend upon it, you won't call them so a short time hence."

But Hurstbourne, as I might have known, was not the man to surrender upon any terms, hard or easy, so long as he had a kick left in him.

"We'll see about giving in when we are beaten," he remarked, with a grim look about the corners of his mouth. "I can't tell at present whether Paul Gascoigne is a liar or only a cowardly sneak ; but I'll find out presently. I'm going round to his house, and you'll have to come with me, Martyn."

"I don't see in what way my presence is likely to be of use," I answered. "If the family dirty linen is to be washed, it had better be washed in private ; and I'm afraid I shouldn't act as a restraining force upon Mr. Gascoigne, supposing that he has made up his mind to go in for a public display."

Hurstbourne said that wasn't the question. Of course no representations on my part, or on the part of any other man who had the feelings of a gentleman, would avail to shake the purpose of that self-satisfied cad : but there were occasions on which it was as well to be provided with a witness.

"Besides," he added, "I may want you. I shouldn't wonder if there was going to be a row, and in a row a long-armed, muscular chap like you is pretty apt to be valuable."

This was indeed a pleasing prospect. Was I to be asked to knock Mr. Paul Gascoigne, M. P., down and sit on his head while Hurstbourne rifled his pockets? Anyhow, I thought I had better accompany him, not as an aggressor but as a peacemaker, and accordingly I made no further protest.

The doors of the spacious mansion in Park Lane which had served several successive Dukes of Hurstbourne as a London residence, and where Paul Gascoigne now dwelt all by himself, were thrown open to receive us, and we were conducted across a waste of faded Turkey carpet to a somewhat sombre study, in which the eminent legislator was discovered seated at his writing-table and apparently immersed in correspondence. He rose and held out his hand to Hurstbourne (who did not seem to notice it), while he honored me with a bow of faintly surprised recognition.

“I suppose, Arthur,” he began mellifluously, “you have come in consequence of my letter? I think it was quite wise of you to come, and I am glad you have done so; but—wouldn’t it be almost better for us to have our little talk without an audience?”

“Mr. Martyn,” replied Hurstbourne, “has seen your letter and knows all about it. For reasons of my own, I preferred to bring him with me, and anything that you have to say may just as well be said before him as not.”

“Pray please yourself,” returned Mr. Gascoigne in the same suave accents; “it was on your account not on my own, that I objected, and I have no doubt that you are justified in placing implicit reliance upon Mr. Martyn’s discretion. Since he has seen my letter, it is unnecessary for me to acquaint him with the very

painful and—er--shameful event about which I had to write to you, and I daresay I may assume that you and he have called in order to satisfy yourselves that I possess documentary proofs of the truth of my statement."

Hurstbourne said : " Exactly so. Now produce your documentary proofs, please."

" I hold it in my hand," answered Mr. Gascoigne, opening a drawer and taking out a folded sheet of notepaper ; " but before submitting it to your inspection, it would be as well, for the sake of lucidity, that I should inform you of certain episodes connected with your father's early life."

Hurstbourne, I am sorry to say, forgot himself so far as to exclaim : " Damn your lucidity and your episodes too ! Give me that paper and have done with it."

He looked so pugnacious that Mr. Gascoigne glanced apprehensively at the bell, and I judged it appropriate to intervene. " By all means let us have the episodes," said I ; " only I am sure you will understand, Mr. Gascoigne, that your cousin is naturally impatient to arrive at results and that the less time we waste upon prefatory observations the better."

" I will be brief, then," our tormentor rejoined, with an unfriendly side-glance at me ; " if I am also compelled to appear curt and unfeeling, the fault will not be mine. From information which I have received, I gather that my unfortunate uncle, the late Lord Charles Gascoigne, went astray at the very outset of his career. He took to betting and racing, as—as others have done, and, it would seem, with as little experience or knowledge to guide him as others have been equipped with. The usual consequence ensued ; he became involved

in difficulties out of which his brother, the late duke, helped him repeatedly ; he had recourse—so, at least, I am led to infer—to various more or less discreditable expedients for raising the wind ; finally, in what I can only regard as an access of temporary insanity, he actually went the length of forging the duke's name to a check. Detection was certain to follow, and did follow, with the result that you know of. All this, or the essential part of it, you have already heard ; but to enable you to understand the letter which I shall presently show you, I must mention that there was just one redeeming point in an otherwise—h'm—worthless character. Lord Charles was, or at any rate pretended to be, devotedly attached to Miss Julia Nesfield, a lady who was at that time young and—er—no doubt beautiful, and with whom you are well acquainted under her present name of Lady Deverell."

I could not help ejaculating, "Oh, that's it, is it ? I see !"

"If you mean, sir," returned the narrator, looking severely at me, "that you see why Lady Deverell would incur any sacrifice rather than permit her niece to marry the son of such a man as the late Lord Charles Gascoigne, I can only applaud your perspicacity, although I hardly see by what means you have arrived at a perfectly just conclusion."

You can't keep so sententious a donkey as that out of office. I would defy any ministry, no matter how powerful, to do it, backed as he is by his position and his riches.

"I was about to say," he resumed, "when Mr. Martyn interrupted me, that Miss Nesfield remained faithful to her unworthy admirer, notwithstanding the oppo-

sition of her family, and the constant scandals to which his conduct gave rise. At the time when the forgery was committed, he was apparently upon terms of the most unrestricted intimacy with her, and then it was that he wrote the letter which she has now—very rightly and properly, as I think—handed over to me, after having kept the disgraceful secret for so many years. It contains, you will see, a full admission of his guilt. I am authorized by Lady Deverell to say that it is only with extreme reluctance, and under pressure of what she feels to be a paramount necessity, that she has at length betrayed him ; although he was not long in betraying her. Upon the mercenary motives which led him to desert her in favor of a wealthy heiress it is needless for me to dwell ; I have, I hope, said enough to convince you that respect for his memory will scarcely deter either Lady Deverell or me from making use of the weapon that we possess, should we be forced to do so. But I trust that we shall not be so forced. Now you can both of you read the letter, if you wish."

Hurstbourne snatched it up, and ran his eye over it hastily. I did not look at it myself, but he afterwards gave me a succinct report of what had been revealed to him through the medium of that faded ink and discolored paper. The missive, which was addressed to the writer's "dearest Julie," was full of protestations of eternal love, of profound penitence, of determination to eschew evil and do good for the future—a melancholy and ironical record of broken vows and ephemeral repentance, which ought never to have been perused by any human being, save the one to whom it had been so imprudently despatched all those years ago.

As a confession, and as evidence of guilt, it was absolute and complete, Hurstbourne said. He added that, such being the case, he could not, of course, suffer it to remain in existence. That, indeed, was what he openly and unhesitatingly announced at the time ; whereupon Mr. Gascoigne, by a sudden deft movement, and with much presence of mind, repossessed himself of the incriminating document.

Immediately afterwards there was a scuffle. I can truthfully and honestly say that I don't know how or when I was drawn into it, nor what precise object I had in view, beyond the laudable and respectable one of keeping the peace ; but the worst of taking part in scuffles is that one can never tell what position one may find oneself in at the end of them, and, at the risk of forfeiting the reader's esteem, I must confess that when that one ended I found myself holding Mr. Gascoigne's arms tightly behind his back. He was much excited, he was struggling violently, and he was making use of language which, I am assured, is never heard within the precincts of St. Stephen's. Meanwhile, Hurstbourne was deliberately tearing that antediluvian love-letter into little bits, and thrusting the fragments into his pocket. A more high-handed and outrageous proceeding I never heard of, and although, as regards the share that I had in it, I might perhaps plead extenuating circumstances, I will not do so. Amongst other compliments which Mr. Gascoigne addressed to me in the heat of the moment, he called me a hired bully : it is not for me to deny that he was justified in thus describing me.

However, the letter had now been torn to pieces and could not be put together again (for I was sure Hurst-

bourne would swallow the scraps rather than allow that experiment to be tried) ; so that the only question for reasonable men to consider was what was to be done next. Mr. Gascoigne wanted to send for the police ; but by dint of physical and moral suasion I induced him to relinquish so hasty and ill-advised a plan. I pointed out to him that the evidence upon which he had relied no longer existed, that if he were to give his cousin and me into custody upon a charge of having assaulted and robbed him, he would have extreme difficulty in substantiating his accusation, and that he would assuredly be compelled to reveal certain things over which it would be infinitely better, in the interests of everybody concerned, to draw a veil.

“ Admitting,” I continued, “ that you have some ground for complaint of the manner in which you have been dealt with, the fact still remains that you did your best to intimidate us. And no man who is worth his salt will submit to intimidation. Now, won’t you sit down and talk matters over quietly and dispassionately like a sensible being? It doesn’t seem to me at all impossible that some compromise may be agreed upon.”

After some further parley, he grew calmer, and admitted that, since we had taken care to be two to one, we were for the time being in a position to dictate our own terms. He must, however, reserve complete liberty of future action to himself. If we spoke of compromise all he could say was that the cowardly and dishonorable act which had just been perpetrated would certainly not induce him to consent to any compromise which should include the possibility of a marriage between Miss St. George and one of his assailants.

“ I made the mistake,” he remarked, “ of supposing

that I had to do with gentlemen ; you have chosen to take what I should have imagined to be an impossibly base advantage of my error. Well and good ; but you cannot close my lips, and I believe that, among gentlemen, my account of this *fracas* will be accepted rather than yours."

"I think, you know," said I to Hurstbourne, "that that can't be called an unfair way of putting the case. Mr. Gascoigne had no business to hold a pistol to your head ; but you had no business to ask leave to examine his weapon and then destroy it. You have both been in the wrong : can't you both contrive to put yourselves in the right again by a compact which will injure neither of you ? I do not understand Mr. Gascoigne to say that he himself contemplates marrying Miss St. George, but only that his regard for her will not permit him to let her marry you. Why, then, should it not be agreed that, so far as you and he are concerned, Miss St. George shall remain a spinster ? It seems to me——"

"My good Martyn," interrupted Hurstbourne impatiently, "you mean well, but you talk great nonsense. I'll fight fairly with any man who offers to fight me fairly ; but when he tries to stab me in the back I'll beat him the best way I can. I don't care two straws whether this fellow calls me dishonorable or not ; let him summons me or take any other measure that he likes ; it's all one to me. Now I've done what I came here to do, and I'm going away."

Paul Gascoigne made no attempt to intercept him, as he moved towards the door, but merely remarked : "You won't carry your point. You have forfeited all claim to indulgence from me, and even if I were disposed to let you escape scot-free, Lady Deverell would

not spare you. You may take my word for it that she will not consent to an alliance between you and her niece."

"That," returned Hurstbourne, "is a question which may have to be fought out between Lady Deverell and her niece or between Lady Deverell and me; you have nothing to do with it. What has happened to you is that you have tried to play me a dirty trick and failed."

I believe Mr. Gascoigne expressed his opinion of us in well-chosen, trenchant terms; but he offered no opposition to our exit, nor did I listen very attentively to his parting observations. As soon as we were out in the street I began to scold Hurstbourne roundly, and he paid about as much attention to me as I had paid to his partially-vanquished rival.

"It's all quite true, you know," he said, breaking in abruptly upon my harangue, after we had walked some little distance; "the thing did actually happen, just as that brute declared."

"Well, I'm afraid so," I replied; "and that's just the awkward part of it. When you are charged with having done this, that, the other, *et cetera*, what line of defence do you propose to adopt, may I ask?"

He did not respond, but presently inquired whether I thought that any girl who respected herself would consent to marry the son of a forger.

"I can't answer for girls," said I. "Individually, I should not be so unjust as to hold a son responsible for his father's misdeeds; but women don't so much as know what justice means. I should think she would refuse you. I quite hope she will because, in any event, she is one of those expensive luxuries which you can't by any possibility afford."

I expected him to rise ; but he didn't. He had taken me by the arm, and, after a pause, during which I noticed that he was not leading me towards Berkeley Square, I made so bold as to ask whither we were bound now.

“ Why, we're going to Lady Deverell's of course,” he answered. “ You didn't suppose that we had got through the day's work yet, did you ? ”

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BEARDING OF THE LIONESS.

I WAS at a loss to understand what useful purpose could be served by a visit to Lady Deverell, who, in my humble judgment, was made of sterner stuff than Paul Gascoigne, and with whom our interview—supposing that we obtained one—seemed likely to prove even more unpleasant than that which we had just brought to a quasi-victorious close ; but, as Hurstbourne evidently meant to have his own way, I held my peace and hoped that her ladyship would not be at home.

I was disappointed, however ; for, on reaching Upper Grosvenor Street, we were granted admittance and were shown into the empty drawing-room, where we were kept waiting for five minutes. My apprehension of distressing possibilities had led me to inquire softly of the butler whether the young ladies were at home, and he had replied that they had gone out in the carriage ; which both relieved my mind and suggested to me that Lady Deverell might not have been unprepared for a call from one of us. During the interval of suspense that I have mentioned Hurstbourne never opened his lips. He stood on the middle of the hearth-rug, with his hands behind his back, looking pale, resolute and ready to fight any man or woman in the wide world.

Nervous though I was and anxious to be well out of it, I could not help wondering, with some pleasurable emotion of curiosity, what sort of a queer encounter I was about to witness.

Presently the door was thrown open, and the other party to the combat entered the lists. Her forbidding countenance wore a somewhat more than usually hard expression ; yet I divined that she was a little ashamed of herself and a little sorry for the man upon whose head she had brought down the consequences of a forgotten disgrace. She did not offer him her hand, nor did he make any advance towards according her that customary form of greeting ; but I was permitted to press her long, skinny fingers, while she surveyed me interrogatively, as who should say, “ Pray who asked you to put your oar in ? ”

“ You have only yourself to thank,” she began, addressing Hurstbourne, without preface or any simulated doubt as to the nature of his errand ; “ a moment’s reflection will show you that it was not much more agreeable to me to hand that letter over to Mr. Gascoigne than it can have been to you to read it. But you left me no choice ; you refused to listen to repeated warnings—you *would* have it ! After all, now that you know the truth, you will hardly assert that you were entitled to expect much consideration from me.”

“ You think perhaps,” said Hurstbourne, “ that I came here to reproach you. Not at all ; I only came in order to make my position and yours clear : as matters stand now, it seems to want a little clearing up. What you imagine to be your position is this, isn’t it ? —that you possess, or rather that your confederate, Paul Gascoigne, possesses, an incriminating letter which you are de-

terminated to make public unless I comply with certain conditions. In what sort of way you meant to make it public I don't quite understand. Did you propose to communicate it to a news' agency?"

"You know as well as I do," returned Lady Deverell, "that the kind of publication that is required for all intents and purposes doesn't mean publication in the newspapers; though it is likely enough that the story will find its way into some of them. That is, if you are foolish enough to defy us. If you comply with our conditions—as of course you must—we shall not trouble you any further."

"Well, I shall not comply with your conditions," said Hurstbourne. "As for the penalty with which you threaten me, there is one trifling obstacle in the way of your carrying it out; namely, that your evidence has been scattered to the four winds. I can speak positively upon that point, because I tore your letter into shreds with my own hands only a short time ago."

"You did that!" exclaimed Lady Deverell, her eyes flashing and her lips quivering; "you were guilty of such vile treachery and dishonesty as that! Ah, I might have known that you were your father's son! How could that man have been fool enough to post the letter to you! I told him not to part with it."

"Oh, you mustn't be angry with him," answered Hurstbourne coolly; "he took every reasonable precaution. He invited me to inspect the document at his house; he didn't know that I should bring a great big friend with me; still less could he anticipate that we should resort to physical violence. As he himself touchingly remarked, he supposed that he had to do with gentlemen."

Like the majority of her sex, Lady Deverell was puzzled and angered by anything approaching irony. She stared and frowned and then snorted out, "Oh, you don't even pretend to be a gentleman, then?"

"How should I, my dear lady, when you have taken such pains to demonstrate to me that my father ought by rights to have spent the best years of his life in a convict prison? You shouldn't destroy a man's self-respect if you want to keep him nice and scrupulous. You will be shocked to hear that I am not in the very slightest degree ashamed of my conduct. Martyn, as you may see by his face, is a good deal ashamed of having held your friend down while I destroyed your valuable property; but Martyn's father was a respectable man, I daresay, and he himself is about as respectable as they make them. Naturally, he blushes, and naturally, I don't. At all events, there's an end and a finish to your precious letter, and now what are you going to do next?"

"I am surprised at your asking," Lady Deverell declared; "it stands to reason that I shall—well, that I shall expose you."

"Does it? I should have thought that you could hardly expose me without exposing yourself. The threats of exposure would have been all very well, if it had happened to be effectual; but the reality—isn't that rather a different thing? I'm afraid some of your friends will be disrespectful enough to smile when you unfold your tragic tale, and that others will listen to it with a spice of incredulity. It may be true, they will think that you were jilted ages ago by a man who knew that you had it in your power to blast his reputation at any moment; but it isn't over and above likely to be

true. And then they will begin to wonder why, if you meant to reveal the secret at all, you didn't reveal it a little sooner."

"That will easily be explained. I might have revenged myself upon your father if I had condescended to do so and if I had thought that a mere desire for revenge could ever be justifiable. It is because I did not think so that I have hitherto spared him and you. But now I have a motive—a very sufficient motive—for speaking out, and you know very little about me if you imagine that my mouth will be closed by any fear of the laughter of my friends."

"You really mean to proclaim your motive, then? That is courageous of you; though it can't be called discreet. You are really going to announce from the house-tops that your reason for accusing my father of a crime which can't possibly be proved against him is that you are in terror lest your niece should have bestowed her affections upon my father's son? There is one person who won't thank you for your candor, and that is Miss St. George."

"I could have proved him guilty," cried Lady Deverell, a dull red color coming into her faded cheeks; "I have only been deprived of my proof by your infamous brutality. You don't even affect to deny that; and if you did, I could call Mr. Gascoigne and that foolish young Martyn, whom I am sorry to see in his present disgraceful situation, as witnesses."

"No doubt; still you would be left in the painful predicament of having placed Miss St. George in a predicament even more painful than your own. Your dilemma would have been pretty much the same if I had left Paul Gascoigne in undisturbed possession of

your proofs ; but he isn't a very trustworthy person ; so I thought it as well to be on the safe side."

"In other words, you imagine that, after what you have done, you can bully me into silence. You will find that you have made a miscalculation. Up to the present moment I have not said one word to Leila ; but this evening she shall hear the whole truth."

"That is of course ; did you think that I wished to conceal it from her ? But where will you be if, in spite of having heard the whole truth, she tells you that her affections have been bestowed unworthily ?"

"She will not do so. She is a gentlewoman, and it would be impossible for her to feel any affection for a forger's son."

"Oh, I don't know about the impossibility ; you were not unwilling, it seems, to marry the forger himself. I don't blame you for that, I can quite forgive you ; but will Miss St. George forgive your suggesting that she is ready to throw herself into the arms of an humble and disgraced individual who hasn't yet asked her to marry him ?"

"That is begging the question ; you are going to ask her to marry you."

"Perhaps. Anyhow, I shall do exactly as I feel disposed about it, and I shall not ask your permission. You said, a short while ago, that I wasn't entitled to expect much consideration from you ; now, I don't think you are entitled to expect much consideration from me."

"I am not asking you for any," Lady Deverell declared, with some emotion ; "yet, if you had a spark of honorable or gentlemanlike feeling, you would acknowledge that I have not been ungenerous to you and

yours. I have kept your shameful secret, and I should have kept it to my dying day, but for your impudent attempt to thrust yourself into my family. Oh, I understand your smile; your retort is easy, and you haven't shrunk from making it already. I was willing to marry a forger. Yes; I was willing to marry him, because I cared for him and believed that he cared for me, and because I was too young to know that a man who had done such a thing was certain to do other things as bad and worse. It is worthy of a Gascoigne to sneer at me for my folly. But now I am older and wiser; now I am determined to save others from such a misfortune as nearly overtook me; and it is not the dread of being laughed at, or even of being disbelieved, that will deter me from doing my duty."

I broke silence for the first time to remark, "That isn't so badly put." The words were forced from me by my admiration for the genuine human excitement which had momentarily transformed a sour old woman into a sort of tragedy queen; but the chief actors, I suppose, did not feel any need of a chorus, for neither of them vouchsafed me the slightest attention. Hurstbourne said gravely:

"Look here, Lady Deverell; you were badly treated once upon a time, I have no doubt, and you were entitled to choose your own opportunity for paying off old scores. I don't condemn you; but at the same time, I don't think it lies in your mouth to condemn me. It's a case of pot and kettle. To serve my own selfish ends, I haven't scrupled to commit a species of felony, and to serve your own selfish ends, you haven't scrupled to do things which, in my humble opinion, are just as felonious as if they were punishable by the law of the

land. It really isn't worth our while to call each other names."

"I have done nothing felonious and nothing wrong," the old lady returned ; "still less have I done anything selfish. It was for my niece's sake, not for my own, that I felt bound to take that letter out of the desk in which I have kept it locked up for more years than you have lived in the world."

"Ah, I wasn't thinking about the letter ; I was thinking about your treatment of a girl to whom you were supposed to be acting in the capacity of a mother. It was very pretty and very unselfish on your part to offer hospitality and protection to Miss Martyn, wasn't it ? You knew—or, at all events, you thought you knew—that I had not the smallest intention of asking her to be my wife ; but that was no reason why there shouldn't be a flirtation between us, or why the flirtation shouldn't have results which would exactly suit your book. I am not going to tell you how I discovered your amiable little design ; but I have discovered it, as you see, and upon my word, I don't see what business you have to mount the high horse when you talk to me. If I am a despicable being, it strikes me very forcibly that you are another."

Lady Deverell was visibly disconcerted. I don't know whether she would have met his assertion with a flat contradiction if she had not been hampered by the memory of a certain conversation which I had overheard ; but I daresay she would not, for she had an unusual share of masculine attributes. What she did deny, in a few words, was that she had ever trifled with my sister's happiness.

"Miss Martyn," said she, bluntly and somewhat in-

elegantly, "wouldn't touch you with a pair of tongs ; you may make your mind as easy as mine is on that score. Think just what you please about me ; I don't value your good opinion. Am I to understand, then, that you intend to persist in your courtship of Leila St. George ? "

"I thought I had told you already that I should do exactly as I felt disposed ; I only wondered whether you would be foolish enough to go in for public revelations."

"Private revelations will probably suffice," answered Lady Deverell dryly : "but, to use your own words, I shall do exactly as I feel disposed."

"I see," observed Hurstbourne. "Then I think we have pretty well exhausted the subject and may wish you good-bye."

We effected our retreat with more or less of ostensible dignity ; but I could not feel that we had cut a very dignified figure in the above encounter, and the moment that we were once more out in the open air, I endeavored to show my companion how hopeless was the struggle to which he had committed himself.

"It is possible," I said, "that Lady Deverell and Mr. Gascoigne may keep their own counsel, because I don't suppose that they are either of them particularly anxious to provoke the hilarity of their neighbors ; but you must indeed be sanguine if you expect Miss St. George to accept you after the 'private revelation' which is about to be made to her."

"Who told you that she would get the chance ? " asked Hurstbourne tranquilly.

"I was under the impression that you had," I replied.

“ You were under a false impression, then. That girl has no more heart than a stone ! It was she who enlightened me about your sister and the old woman’s designs. She did it at the ball, and I was much obliged to her for opening my eyes. Oh, they’re a nice lot, these women ! ”

“ It has always been my conviction that the vices of the sex are in excess of its virtues,” I remarked.

“ With one exception, eh ? Well, I grant you the one exception. Perhaps, if it wasn’t asking too much of you, you might consent to throw my mother in ; but I won’t insist upon it. Poor old mother ; this will be a sad blow for her ! ”

“ The discovery that you have lost all esteem for her sex in general and for Miss St. George in particular ? ”

“ No ; don’t laugh—there’s nothing to laugh at. I mean the discovery that we are eternally disgraced. Perhaps it won’t be a discovery, though—who knows ? We shall have to hide our heads somewhere or other abroad, I suppose. Well, we should have had to go into exile any way, for I’m about broke. All the same, I didn’t make such a bad fight for it when I was driven into the last ditch, did I ? ”

I could not quite bring myself to commend his method of fighting ; but it seemed rather absurd to have fought so hard only in order to run away. I comforted him to the best of my ability, pointing out that, with a little courage and a good deal of economy, his affairs still admitted of re-establishment upon a solid basis, and recommending him, if he did decide to leave the country, to do so only by way of preparing himself and his associates for the inevitable change which would have to take place in his manner of living after

his return. As for eternal disgrace, that was nonsense ; since he really didn't want to marry Miss St. George, he might safely count, I thought, upon the silence of Lady Deverell and his cousin.

"My dear fellow, they may have the whole story printed in the form of a leaflet and stand at Hyde Park Corner, distributing copies to the passers-by all day long, if they choose," he returned ; "the disgrace is in there being such a story to tell, not in its being told."

"Yet, for the sake of destroying the evidence, you have risked getting yourself and me into a horrible mess," I remarked, with a shade of irritation. "Why on earth did you do that?"

"Now that you ask me, I hardly know. I suppose I wanted to show Paul Gascoigne that, if it came to bullying, two could play at that game. Very likely, as you say, he and that old woman will hold their tongues now ; but it makes no difference, because I shan't be able to hold mine. I mean I shall always have to confess the truth to anybody whom I—well, to anybody whose opinion signifies. You are good enough to declare that you wouldn't hold a man responsible for his father's misdeeds ; but you admitted, when I asked you, that no girl who respected herself would marry the son of a forger."

"I never said that," I replied ; "I said I didn't think Miss St. George would accept you ; but it is no longer a question of Miss St. George, thank Heaven ! It will be time enough to bother yourself when there comes to be a question of somebody else ; but that won't be yet awhile, I hope. The truth is that you are too young and (considering your rank) too poor to think of marrying at present."

"My chances wouldn't be greatly improved if I were older and richer, I expect," he returned despondently. "I wonder whether you would work yourself up into an awful rage if I told you something, Martyn?"

I answered that his conduct for a long time past had enraged me to that extent that it would be difficult to conceive of any confession which could enrage me farther.

"I'm not so sure of that," said Hurstbourne; "still I should rather like to make a clean breast of it to you. That can't do either you or me any harm, if it doesn't do us any good. I daresay I was mistaken, but I thought perhaps you might have guessed that I had fallen in love with your sister when we were down in the country. I won't deny that I tried to get over it as soon as I found it out; I had an idea that I ought to marry somebody with aristocratic connections, if I could, and I did for a time think of marrying Miss St. George—not because I cared a pin about her, but because I wanted to cut that fellow Paul out. I should never have done it, though. I couldn't have brought myself to the point of proposing to her, even if she hadn't made me hate her by the way in which she spoke about your sister that night at the ball. I knew before then that there was only one person in the world who could ever be my wife—and that person never will be my wife now. It wouldn't be the slightest use to ask her, would it?"

I hesitated for a moment (the complicated aspect of the situation being very apparent to me), before I replied: "I don't think it would be much use, Hurstbourne. I am sure that, if Nora cared for you, she wouldn't be influenced in the smallest degree by any-

thing that you might see fit to tell her about your father's shortcomings; but I doubt very much whether she does care for you. You haven't exhibited yourself in a particularly becoming light to her, you see. Candor deserves to be met with candor, so I'll admit that you might have won her heart at one time, if you had tried to do so; but, by your own admission, you tried to do the contrary. I should imagine that you have been completely successful. Take my advice and let the whole affair pass into the category of might-have-beens. The things that might have been wouldn't always have turned out well if they had been, and after all, we don't belong to the class from which dukes and duchesses are recruited, Nora and I."

I confess that the meekness with which Hurstbourne bowed to my ruling disappointed me a little. I thought that he would have been less submissive if he had been really in earnest, and I didn't quite see why he should have mentioned Nora's name to me at all unless he had been in earnest. I was, however, convinced that she had overcome her temporary infatuation, and, since that was the case, it was perhaps just as well that she should not be unsettled by an offer which she would have had no choice but to refuse. The remainder of our walk was accomplished in unbroken silence.

CHAPTER XX.

FEMININE CONSISTENCY.

IT does not seem impossible that, in the course of the humble narrative which is now nearing its conclusion, I may have conveyed to feminine readers an impression that I am incapable of comprehending or rendering justice to their sex. To that criticism most of them will probably add that they can get on very well without my comprehension or my justice. Perhaps, therefore, it would be impertinent on my part to offer excuses and apologies ; still, if I can't do justice to others, I am always anxious to do justice to myself, and that is why I seize this opportunity of declaring how fully I recognize and admire the power of women to come out strong in times of emergency. Personally, I think they would be pleasanter to live with if they did not habitually exaggerate the proportions of mole-hills by way of offset to their occasional courage in levelling mountains ; but that is neither here nor there. I gladly admit that they possess the latter form of courage ; and Lady Charles Gascoigne, of all people in the world, gave us a splendid example of it when we informed her that, in consequence of the recent ducal extravagances the ducal *ménage* would have to be speedily shorn of all its magnificence.

"Oh, well," she said, after I had broken the news to her as considerately as I could, and had spoken of the proposed reductions in her son's establishment as not only commendable but really indispensable, "that isn't so bad, you know; it isn't ruin and it isn't bankruptcy. We shall go abroad for a year or two and amuse ourselves very well in an economical way until things come round, and I am sure Mr. Martyn will do his best for us during our absence. Do you think of letting Hurstborne, Arthur? There ought to be no trouble about finding a tenant."

Hurstbourne embraced her, swearing that no man had ever had so good a mother and that few mothers had ever been afflicted with such a fool of a son. I suppose that, in a certain sense, the poor woman had been a good mother to him; at all events, she had been a most affectionate one, and I must say that she behaved on this occasion far better than I had dared to anticipate. While they were exchanging endearing epithets and trying to persuade one another that it was really rather fun than otherwise to descend once more into obscurity from those sun-illumined heights upon which their sojourn had been so brief, I slipped out of the room. I knew that there was something else to be said, something which could hardly be made light of, and which had better not be alluded to in the presence of a third person; so I escaped to my private den, where I sat about making preparations for the winding up and resigning of my stewardship.

I had been wrestling for rather more than half an hour with the intricacies of unmanageable figures when a tremendous tap at the door heralded the entrance of Lady Charles. I had felt quite sure that

she would seek me out, and hoped against hope that she wouldn't. What, indeed, could I say to her, and what possible comfort was it in my power to offer her? I did my best, and she seemed relieved to hear that, in my opinion, there was little or no likelihood of the history of her late husband's misdemeanors being made public property; but of course I could not tell her that I thought that defunct scamp justified in having signed another man's name, and, upon my honor, I believe that was what she wanted me to say. It was so terrible, she moaned, after she had cast herself down upon a chair and had allowed her tears to run unrestrainedly down her poor old painted cheeks, that Arthur should be driven to despise his father! Well, it was terrible, no doubt; only I did not see how Arthur was to help it, and I remarked that he had at least done what in him lay to protect his father's memory.

"Oh, yes," she sobbed; "he has acted nobly and generously, and like his father's son!"—a comic and pathetic tribute of applause to our joint exploit. "And I am very grateful to you," she added, "for having helped him to silence that cold-blooded villain. You have shown yourself a true friend to Arthur, Mr. Martyn; I shall never forget it."

"Thank you," I answered; "but we are not out of the wood yet, and I am by no means sure that we haven't done a stupid day's work between us. Our chief hope of escaping the penalty due to our offence is that your son apparently no longer wishes to promote Miss St. George to the highest rank in the peerage. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes," she answered; "he told me that and—and other things besides. I was very glad—and very sorry,

I mean, I was glad that he has no real affection for that girl ; because she isn't a nice girl. Paul Gascoigne may take her, if he can get her, and I wish him joy of his bargain. It isn't that sort of thing that signifies."

What, according to her, did signify, was the pessimistic view which Hurstbourne had taken up of a by-gone and condoned offence. I agreed with her that no shadow of blame rested upon him, but I could not quite follow her in her elaborate attempt to prove that the late Lord Charles Gascoigne had not been so very much to blame either. She had a good deal to say upon the subject ; she made out as good a case for her husband as could have been made out. It is likely enough that her husband would have resisted temptation as successfully as the rest of us, if only he had not happened to find temptation irresistible. The touching part of her incoherent narrative consisted in the unconscious evidence of her own absolute unselfishness which she displayed in every sentence of it.

She had married a more or less penitent scapegrace, whom she had adored, and who had perhaps been fond of her after a fashion which had not deterred him from squandering her fortune ; when he had been taken from her, she had devoted herself, heart and soul, to her son, for whose sake she had cheerfully submitted to a thousand discomforts and petty miseries ; the only thing that rendered her disconsolate now was that, notwithstanding all her precautions, her son had at length been let into a secret which, she sadly feared, had broken his heart.

I endeavored to reassure her. Naturally she did not attach much importance to my assertion that hearts

are not broken so easily as all that; but she appeared to be in some measure consoled by the convincing terms in which I represented to her that, from the moment their quarry was released, neither Lady Deverell nor Mr. Gascoigne could have any conceivable motive for disclosing what she was so eager to bury in oblivion. She left the room at last in a somewhat happier frame of mind, and, I daresay, went upstairs to conceal the traces of her emotion beneath the customary coat of rouge and white-wash. I was thankful to her for her delicacy in abstaining from any reference to Nora (because it was evident that Hurstbourne had been as frank with her as he had been with me), and also for the matter-of-course way in which she received the announcement of my impending resignation. I had been prepared for some useless opposition and remonstrance on the latter head.

I did subsequently meet with some opposition from Hurstbourne, who seemed to think that he had involved me in his downfall, and who reproached himself for having caused me, as he phrased it, to "make a false start" in life. He declared that he could see no earthly reason why I should not continue to draw my salary and manage his affairs for him during his absence. He would not accept as a serious excuse (indeed it was not a very good one) my allegation that he would soon have no affairs to manage; he even went so far to accuse me of ratting from a sinking ship. However, he had no answer to make when I asked him whether, after the confession that I had had from him, he thought it would be desirable or possible for my sister to live with me while I was living upon his estate. My sister, I added, would have to live with me, because there was

nowhere else for her to live. The poor fellow was very meek and submissive. Lady Deverell and Mr. Gascoigne would hardly have recognized their brazen-faced assailant in the dejected young man who assured me that nothing except his duty to his mother restrained him from putting an end to a useless and valueless existence.

“ You will be as valuable as ever in a few years, if only you will keep very quiet during that time,” I returned, “ and you may depend upon it that plenty of uses will be found for you before you die. Meanwhile, it would be an exceedingly cowardly act on your part to hang yourself, leaving me to be summoned by your cousin and punished with the utmost rigor of the law.”

But Mr. Gascoigne did not take out a summons. We heard nothing of or from him on the following day, nor did any communication reach us from Lady Deverell. I took it that they were waiting for Hurstbourne to make the next move.

“ They’ll have to wait a long time then,” he remarked on my imparting this view to him; “ I don’t know what more there is for me to say or do. I shouldn’t wonder if I were to meet the old woman to-night, though. I shall be curious to see whether she will cut me or denounce me publicly.”

He was, as usual, dining out, and was going on afterwards to I forget whose reception—a quasi-political gathering at which Lady Deverell was pretty sure to be present. I did not think it at all probable that she would denounce him; but I was, I confess, not less curious than he as to the reception which her ladyship might see fit to accord him, and a good deal more so, perhaps as to the method by which Miss St. George might con-

trive to extricate herself from a somewhat puzzling position. Consequently I busied myself with accounts of past expenditure and schemes for future retrenchment until long after midnight, when my patience was rewarded by the entrance of my noble employer, who cast himself down upon a chair and said :

“ Throw me a cigar and give me something to drink, will you, like a good chap ? Well, I’ve had a rare evening of it ! Everybody has heard that I’m broke, you know.”

“ Everybody,” I remarked, “ always does hear of the things that haven’t yet happened. That’s not a matter of much consequence, is it ? But I hope everybody hasn’t heard of what actually did happen yesterday.”

“ Not that I am aware of,” he answered, after swallowing the half of the whiskey-and-soda which I had poured out for him. “ Miss St. George has, because she has received full and particular information from her dear old aunt ; but she isn’t going to talk about it. She said it wouldn’t be worth her while, and I quite agreed with her.”

“ Oh, you saw Miss St. George, then ? ”

“ Rather ! She doesn’t mind calling a spade a spade, that young woman. She led me off into a corner to tell me that she knew the worst, and that, upon the whole, she rather admired my pluck or my impudence—she didn’t quite know which to call it.”

“ Well ? ” I said, after waiting some little time for him to continue.

“ Well, we had a longish talk, and I mentioned that I was going to put everything down, and leave the country, and so forth. Of course I understood what she was driving at, and that she wanted me to give her

the satisfaction of having refused me ; but, as I declined to come up to the scratch, she ended by asking me point-blank whether I hadn't something to say to her."

" How charmingly ingenuous ! And you replied ? "

" I replied that I didn't see what there was to be said, except good-bye. Then I don't exactly remember what took place, or how it was that she arrived at the point of calling me every bad name that she could lay her tongue to. I hooked it as soon as I could. The fact is, my dear Martyn," continued Hurstbourne, with the air of one who, by dint of long experience and observation, has discovered a recondite truth, " that an angry woman, is the deuce and all ! It's no use reasoning with her ; it's no use pointing out to her that she hasn't the slightest excuse for being angry with you ; the only plan is to bolt. Hang it all ! you're not bound to propose to a woman whom you would rather die than marry, merely in order that she may boast afterwards of having dismissed you with a flea in your ear."

That proposition was indisputable, and I did not dispute it, although it occurred to me that Miss St. George might have more substantial grounds for indignation than the one mentioned. Frankly speaking, it was little enough that I cared about any disappointment which might have been inflicted upon Miss St. George, and little credit that I gave her for a genuine desire to participate in the self-denials of an exile. I was rejoiced to think that that chapter was closed, and rejoiced also to notice that Hurstbourne's spirits had been, to some extent, improved by the events of the evening. I am sure he did not suspect at the time, and I doubt whether he has ever suspected since, that he had inspired Lady

Deverell's niece with a passion which, by reason of the poverty of language, must be classed under the generic heading of love.

On the succeeding afternoon I was meditating a visit to Upper Grosvenor Street, for the purpose of conferring with Nora, and making arrangements for her speedy removal to some place of shelter which I could call my own, when I was spared the trouble of rising from my chair by the arrival of my sister, who, before I could say a word, informed me that she meant to quit Lady Deverell's house on the morrow. She had, it appeared, been made acquainted with the various episodes of the previous forty-eight hours; so that she was prepared to take up her abode with me provisionally so soon as I should have laid down my present functions.

"Only," said she, "you won't, of course, be able to leave the duke for some weeks to come, and I really can't live any longer in the same house with Miss St. George. I am sorry to make a fuss; but you would admit that I have no choice in the matter if you had heard the way in which she spoke to me last night. It was at a great crush; the duke was there, and I suppose he must have given her to understand that he had no intentions. Anyhow, after they had been talking together for some time, she marched up to me in a towering passion, and charged me, in the plainest of plain terms, with having done my utmost to catch him. She didn't mince matters; she said a worm might be a useful bait to attract a fish, but it wasn't the worm who retained possession of him when he had been hooked, and I might take her word for it that, sly as I was, my slyness wouldn't be of any service to me. She was so

furious that I daresay she hardly knew what she was saying ; but it wasn't particularly pleasant to me to listen to her, and I don't suppose it can have been particularly pleasant to Lady Deverell either. Afterwards Lady Deverell apologized to me, and gave me a sort of explanation. She begged me to stay with her as long as I felt inclined, and promised that I shouldn't be so insulted a second time ; nevertheless, I don't think she was much grieved to hear that I had already made arrangements for leaving."

"That you had made arrangements ?"

"Yes ; by a queer stroke of good fortune, Uncle John happened to be one of the crowd. I had shaken hands with him a few minutes before ; so, as soon as Miss St. George turned her back upon me, I sought him out, and reminded him of an old offer of his. He was quite pleasant about it ; he said they would, of course, be very happy to give me house-room, and he didn't ask more questions than he could help. Naturally, he lamented what he called 'the pecuniary collapse of that foolish young nobleman,' which, he feared, would 'throw Philip out of work again' ; but I don't think he suspected the existence of any other intricacies in our relations with the foolish young nobleman. So, you see, I shall be all right, and you needn't worry yourself about me until you have cleared yourself from more important worries."

I had nothing to urge against an arrangement which, under all circumstances, seemed to be the wisest and most feasible that could be suggested ; but I thought that I ought, perhaps, to say a word or two about Hurstbourne, and I should probably have been clumsy enough to utter those words if Hurstbourne himself had

not come into the room before I had quite made up my mind.

On discovering that I was not alone, he looked slightly taken aback, but at once regained his self-possession and chattered away for the next quarter of an hour upon all sorts of subjects with an assumption of cheerful carelessness which I could not sufficiently admire. Nora did not behave quite so well. She was embarrassed and showed that she was embarrassed ; she answered him at random ; she demonstrated to him as plainly as could be that she was wondering when he meant to go away ; and, as he displayed no sign of responding to her tacit invitation, she herself rose at last, with the somewhat uncivil remark that we could resume our interrupted colloquy another day.

“Are you walking home, Miss Martyn ?” asked Hurstbourne, getting up at the same moment. “I’ll walk round with you, if you don’t object, and see you safely over the crossings.”

She did object ; but her objections were disregarded and her assertion that there are no crossings worth speaking of between Berkeley Square and upper Grosvenor Street was met with a counter-assertion to the effect that Berkeley Square is just about the most dangerous place in London to traverse without an efficient escort. Nobody, so Hurstbourne declared, is run over in Piccadilly or Cheapside, where there are refuges and vigilant policemen ; but a tradesman’s cart or a hansom cab, rattling down Hay Hill with a loose rein, is the very thing of all others that is most likely to bring about the death of the unwary pedestrian. They were still arguing when they departed. Looking out of the window presently, I saw them walk-

ing off, side by side, in the sunshine, having to all appearance composed or forgotten their difference. Well, there was perhaps no great harm, if there was no great good, in their holding a farewell conversation. In one sense the whole thing was a pity; still the pity of it might have been even more conspicuous if things had gone moderately straight with them, instead of immoderately crooked—if he had not chanced to come across Miss St. George and she had not learnt to appraise him at a value considerably lower than that which she had placed upon him in the earlier stages of their intimacy. The old aristocratic notions of what constitutes a misalliance have, it is true, passed out of date; yet there remains a difference between espousing an American heiress, whose relations reside on the other side of the Atlantic, and making a duchess out of a British orphan, whose father was engaged in commerce and whose commercial undertakings ended disastrously into the bargain. I did not regard it as by any means proved that Nora would have been a happy woman, had the Fates permitted of her becoming Duchess of Hurstbourne.

In some degree soothed by these philosophic cogitations, I returned to my figures; and if ever I was amazed in my life, I was amazed when Hurstbourne burst in upon me, towards evening in a state of insane jubilation, exclaiming :

“ It’s all right, old man, and you may congratulate me if you like. She’ll marry me, in spite of everything.”

“ Well, then,” I returned, “ all I can say is that you may eliminate the one exception which you and I agreed to make from our estimate of the female sex at large the other day. How is a reasonable male creature to ac-

count for such behavior? It is as absurd for ~~he'll~~ to think of marrying you now as it is for you to think of marrying her. I don't see what you mean by it—either of you. Why, it isn't a week since you were upon the verge of proposing to Miss St. George, and it isn't a week since she solemnly assured me that she had quite got over her——”

I checked myself; but not in time to prevent him from divining the conclusion of my unfinished sentence.

“ She did then! ” he cried triumphantly. “ I was sure of it—I knew she had loved me, just as I loved her, from the very first; only she wouldn't admit it. Now, look here, my dear Martyn; you mustn't be crabbed and unpleasant about this, because it's all settled and we know very well what we are going in for. As Nora says, we are neither of us people of expensive tastes——”

“ Merciful Heavens! ” I ejaculated; “ does she say that you are not a person of expensive tastes? If she'll say that, she'll say anything; I give her up.”

“ Neither of us people of expensive tastes,” resumed Hurstbourne composedly, “ and we shall rather enjoy wandering about Europe and living on second floors for a year or two. Oh, it wasn't the money part of the business that I was afraid of! But, thank God! Nora knows all about my poor father, and it hasn't made a bit of difference in her. She says she doesn't think it would have made very much difference if I had been a forger myself.”

“ Don't I tell you that she would say anything! I suppose it didn't strike either you or her that there would be a certain propriety in asking for my consent.”

“ Oh, yes, it did; we shall be inconsolable if you don't give your consent, only that won't prevent us

from marrying without it, you know. Think it over, old chap, and don't look so glum about it. I must run down and see my mother now. Of course she is to live with us while we are abroad; Nora made a point of that."

What further proof could I require that my unhappy sister had ceased to be a responsible being?

CHAPTER XXI.

VENIT HESPERUS ITE CAPELLAE.

I DOUBT whether poor Lady Charles was altogether enchanted by the news of her son's engagement, coupled though it was with the announcement of a plan for her future well-being at which she had the good sense to laugh. Truth to tell, the match was neither a brilliant nor an opportune one, and some credit was due to her for giving her consent to it almost without hesitation. To be sure, she would have consented to Hurstbourne's marriage with a negress, if his heart had really been set upon so grievous an alliance; for she was one of those women whom Heaven has blessed with a sincere belief that the persons whom they love can do no wrong. *Terque, quatreque beatæ!* we admire or deride them, as our individual temperaments may dictate, but, whatever verdict we may see fit to pass upon them, we can hardly deny them the tribute of our envy.

As for my consent, I have already intimated that that was not held worthy of a second thought by those who might have remembered that I was, after all, the head of my insignificant family and the legitimate

protector of my only sister. Nora, when she came to make her necessary confession to me, was pleased to carry things off with a very high hand. She told me in so many words that she didn't care an atom whether her conduct struck me as inconsequent or not; she said her life was her own and she had a right to do as she pleased with it; furthermore she took the liberty to insinuate that, if I didn't consider the Duke of Hurstbourne to be one of the noblest and most exemplary of contemporary magnates, I must have singularly misused the opportunities which had been granted to me of studying his character.

"My dear girl," I ventured to remonstrate, "you surely can't have forgotten that your swan was a goose only the other day! Who deplored his unfortunate weakness? Who urged her brother to act as a benevolent mentor to him? Who was never weary of impressing upon me that he would always be sure to do what those about him did?"

"I never called him a goose," she affirmed unblushingly. "I did think that he was liable to be deceived; and it is just because he is so much better and simpler than commonplace folks like you and me that he was in danger of being taken in. Only he hasn't been, you see."

"I'm not so sure about that," I returned. "If he hasn't been taken in by you, you may depend upon it that most people will say he has."

"Let them!" answered Nora, with her chin in the air; "we can very well afford to despise them and their ill-natured tittle-tattle. So long as *he* is satisfied and Lady Charles is satisfied, they may say anything they like, for me. Of course I want you to be satisfied too,

Phil," she added, by way of a complimentary after-thought.

My satisfaction was not, I own, wholly unalloyed. It is a proud thing, no doubt, to be the brother-in-law of a duke; yet, notwithstanding the fine independence of one's temperament and principles, there are certain accusations for which one would rather not afford an excuse, and I could hear in advance the pleasant speeches which would be made when it should transpire that this duke was about to espouse the sister of his factotum. Moreover, I didn't for a moment believe that they would manage to keep out of debt. It was all very fine to talk about living on second floors; but to live on the second floor of the Hotel Bristol in Paris, for example (and that was just the sort of thing that Hurstbourne would do), a man ought to have an income of at least £5,000, and what I wanted him to do was to live for three or four years upon considerably less than half that sum. However, I was very soon made aware that any remonstrances of mine would be regarded as pure impertinences; so I hardened my heart and endeavored to persuade myself that my skin was thick enough, or ought to be thick enough, to withstand pin-pricks. Lady Charles, for her part, was so kind as to assure me that she did not hold me in the least to blame for what had occurred. She added that she had a strong personal affection for her future daughter-in-law and that, although Arthur might have done better, he might easily have done worse.

"When you come to think of it, his father married *me*," she remarked, with a quaint touch of humility which I did not feel entitled to resent.

As regards those pin-pricks, I may say that I received

a sufficient number of them in due course; though Hurstbourne, I believe, escaped such annoyances. Perhaps his friends were content to pity him; perhaps they may have had a not altogether mistaken impression that he was an awkward customer to quarrel with. What I can answer for is that Lady Deverell didn't quarrel with him: on the contrary, she sent Nora a very kind letter of congratulation and a pair of silver-backed brushes, as a wedding-present. Paul Gascoigne did not rise to quite that height of magnanimity; but when I ran against him, one day, in the street, he stopped me to explain at some length that he did not propose to take any further steps in the matter that I knew of.

"I think," he observed, "I made it clear to you and to my cousin—at all events I intended to do so—that action on my side was simply and solely contingent upon action on his; I have no desire to punish him, now that he has recognized in so practical a manner the propriety of yielding to my demands. What need there was for the outrageous attack which he chose to make upon me I am at a loss to understand; the part which you took in the affair, Mr. Martyn, is perhaps more readily comprehensible."

That was one of the above-mentioned pin-pricks to which I had to submit; I can't say that it inflicted very severe suffering upon me. The same weekly journal which informed its readers of a rumor that "the youngest of our unmarried dukes, having failed to astonish the world by a brief and far from brilliant turf career, is about to achieve the notoriety that he covets by contracting a matrimonial alliance with a young woman of obscure origin," contained a more respectful paragraph to the effect that a marriage had been arranged and

would shortly take place between Mr. Paul Gascoigne, M. P., the nephew and residuary legatee of the late Duke of Hurstbourne, and Miss Leila St. George, whose claim to take rank amongst the prominent beauties of the expiring season had been universally admitted.

When this very impertinent and mendacious newspaper fell into the hands of Lady Charles, her indignation was extreme. She was for having the editor beaten within an inch of his life forthwith, and expressed great astonishment that Hurstbourne and I, who were so ready to inflict personal chastisement upon people whom we didn't like, should hesitate to beard such a scurrilous rascal in his editorial den. “‘Obscure origin’ indeed! And you stand smiling there, Mr. Martyn, as if you thought it rather a good joke that your sister should be publicly insulted!”

“But suppose the insulting statement should be true?” I suggested—“suppose our great-grandfather should have been, as I strongly suspect that he was, an altogether obscure individual? No, my dear Lady Charles, we had better not dispute our obscurity; but we may give this imaginative writer the lie by showing that we really don't covet notoriety. If Hurstbourne will take my advice, he will get his wedding over very quickly and quietly and leave England immediately afterwards.”

Upon that point Nora was quite of one mind with me; she wished, if that could be managed, that her wedding should take place with the utmost secrecy at Dover or Folkestone an hour or so before the departure of one of the channel boats. But Hurstbourne demurred a little. He said he didn't see why they should be married in a hole-and-corner way, as if they were

ashamed of themselves ; he hoped his wife would never have reason to be ashamed of him, and most certainly he should never feel otherwise than proud of her ; he was in favor of the parish church of St. George's, Hanover Square, with a Bishop, a full choir, plenty of flowers and the requisite supply of red cloth. Eventually a compromise was arrived at which combined seemliness with a total absence of ostentation. Nora was married from our uncle's house at a small church at Kensington, and only a few near relatives of the contracting parties (the contracting parties hadn't a large number of near relatives), were invited to the ceremony, which was solemnized, at a time of year when the fashionable world had deserted London.

When it was all over, and the bride and bridegroom had set out for Paris, on their way to the Tyrol, Lady Charles betook herself to Brighton, which had always been a favorite resort of hers, while I journeyed north to Hurstbourne Castle all by myself. The place was to be let for a term of years ; but there were still a good many arrangements to be made before it could be prepared for the reception of a tenant, and as I had nothing else to do, I had undertaken to supervise these. To keep Hurstbourne quiet, I had also promised that I would continue for the present to draw my usual salary—a promise which was the more easily made because I had taken care to draw no salary at all for a long time past. It was impossible to make him understand that he couldn't give away what he hadn't got.

I can't say that the remainder of that summer was a very agreeable or a very satisfactory period to me. Nothing so scandalous had ever before been contemplated as the letting of Hurstbourne Castle to some wealthy

commercial personage, and, naturally enough, the tenants, as well as the household servants, were rather short in their manner when I attempted to approach them upon the old friendly terms. I daresay they might have forgiven me if the duke had not married my sister; but that his marriage had something to do with his misfortunes was an idea which had evidently taken firm possession of their minds, though they refrained from giving actual utterance to it. Then, early in the autumn, came the news of Mr. Gascoigne's nuptials and of his imminent home-coming with his bride, which may have led them to draw distressing and invidious comparisons.

“I did hear, sir,” Mr. Higgins had the doubtful taste to remark to me, “that his Grace was rather sweet upon the young lady at one time. Well, I wish it was his Grace that was bringing of her home now—that I do !”

In default of his Grace, Mrs. Gascoigne was brought home by a husband who, unlike Hurstbourne, was enabled to lavish upon her all the luxuries that money could buy, and, from what I heard, she had no notion of allowing his money to lie idle in his pocket. Having to ride over to the neighborhood of Lavenham upon a matter of business one day, I encountered her, driving a pair of well-matched cobs, and she pulled up to inquire what news I had of the exiles.

“I am so sorry for the poor duke,” she was kind enough to say; “I know how he must hate foreign life, and how frightfully bored he must be. Still, under the circumstances, it is just as well, perhaps, that he should remain out of sight until people have had time to forget what a fool he has made—oh, I beg your pardon !

I quite forgot that you were his brother-in-law now. Please, give him my kindest remembrances when you write, and tell him that we have some idea of becoming his tenants. Mr. Gascoigne feels that the castle ought to be occupied by one of the family; so, if he doesn't want too exorbitant a rent for the place, we may take it off his hands."

"Am I to consider this a formal offer, Mrs. Gascoigne?" I inquired.

She hesitated for a moment and then replied: "Well, you can mention it when you write, anyhow. Personally, I should be only too glad to do anything that I could to help him out of his embarrassments, poor fellow!"

It is scarcely necessary for me to say that I did not transmit the above kindly message. Some weeks later it became my duty to transmit to my brother-in-law a message of an infinitely more agreeable character. Amongst the entailed estates which he had inherited was a barren tract of land, lying some twenty or thirty miles to the northward of the Castle, which in the late duke's time had gradually fallen out of cultivation, owing to the poverty of the soil, and which we now retained in our own hands for grazing purposes. It was of little value, as we thought, for that or any other purpose; but a few months before a suspicion had arisen of the existence of coal beneath the surface, and, permission having been obtained to make investigations, the suspicion had by this time become converted into a certainty. I had said nothing about it to Hurstbourne, because I knew that if he were told, he would at once jump to the conclusion that boundless wealth was within his grasp and would act accordingly;

but now I could no longer conceal from him the fact that he owned a property the value of which might be very great indeed.

He behaved much more coolly and sensibly than I had expected. He gave me full powers to make such arrangements as might seem advisable to me, merely remarking that, although he should like very well to be a rich man, he was perfectly happy as a poor one. He wrote from Venice, where he stated that Nora and he were having a glorious time of it. If they didn't spend the winter there, they would spend it in "some such place," he supposed. For his own part, he was game to go to any place that Nora might fancy.

How long this mood would have lasted, or into what sort of a poor man Hurstbourne would have developed if he had remained poor, it is difficult to say. The problem can never now be removed from the calm sphere of hypothesis; for it appears that there is coal enough beneath that waste land of his to keep the fires of his descendants alight for many generations to come. Nora and he returned home early in the ensuing year, by which time there was no longer any question of letting the abode of his ancestors. They were met, of course, by an enthusiastic welcome on the part of their tenantry and other dependents, which was, I hope, as much a tribute to their personal merits as to their improved circumstances. But, charitable as I am, I cannot go quite so far as to believe that Nora's unassisted merits would ever have placed her upon that pinnacle in high society which she now occupies with so much ease and elegance. We live in an age when aristocracy is almost, if not yet altogether, synonymous with wealth, and the philosophic bystander must be

content to note, with rejoicing, that every now and then wealth does, by some happy accident, fall to those who know how to use it. One of the best uses to which it can be put is to distribute it judiciously amongst the many who toil in penury so that the few may be rich, and I must say for my sister and her husband that they do their duty very fairly well in that particular. It is needless to add that Hurstbourne has returned to the turf ; but he is now so big a man that he can afford to eschew the book-makers, and he is going in for breeding, which is a far more sportsmanlike and satisfactory phase of the pursuit than purchasing animals in whom it must be difficult to feel anything beyond a pecuniary interest. The Duchess of Hurstbourne and Mrs. Paul Gascoigne are not exactly friends ; but they speak when they meet, and I can answer for it that one of them abstains from saying nasty things about the other behind her back.

Only a few days ago I heard a piece of news which had the privilege of amusing me. I always knew that Lady Deverell held the Rector of her parish in high and deserved veneration ; but I never thought that she would display it in so striking a fashion as by the removal of him and his numerous olive-branches from the Rectory to Fern Hill. That, however, is actually what she means to do. I had it from her own lips, so that there can be no mistake about it.

“ I can see by your face,” she remarked candidly, “ that you think me an old fool ; but perhaps I may not be quite such a fool as I look. Although I am old, I have an iron constitution ; I may live for another twenty or even thirty years—it isn’t in the least unlikely—and I don’t enjoy living alone. Mr. Burgess will, at any rate,

give me the company of a man whom I admire and esteem. As for the children—well, I have a large house, and I do not intend to surrender the control of my money to anybody. I needn't say that, at Mr. Burgess's time of life and mine, we aren't such idiots as to talk about marrying for love; he assures me that he never was really enamored of your sister, and, to tell you the truth, I shouldn't have cared a straw if he had been. As you know, there was a man once upon a time for whom I did care—and who was not worth caring for. I have forgiven him now. One forgives, let me tell you, Mr. Martyn, chiefly because one forgets, and one forgets because one can't help it."

"It is a pity," I made so bold as to remark, "that you couldn't manage to forgive and forget Lord Charles Gascoigne a little sooner."

"I can understand your thinking so; yet I did no more than I felt bound to do, and I can't see that much harm has come of it. It is true that although one forgets most things, there are one or two which can't be forgotten, and I suspect that, if your young duke lives to be twice my age, he will never succeed in forgetting altogether what his father was. So, if I had a grudge against him, I daresay we may cry quits."

There is no denying that Lady Deverell is a singularly disagreeable old woman.

THE END.

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